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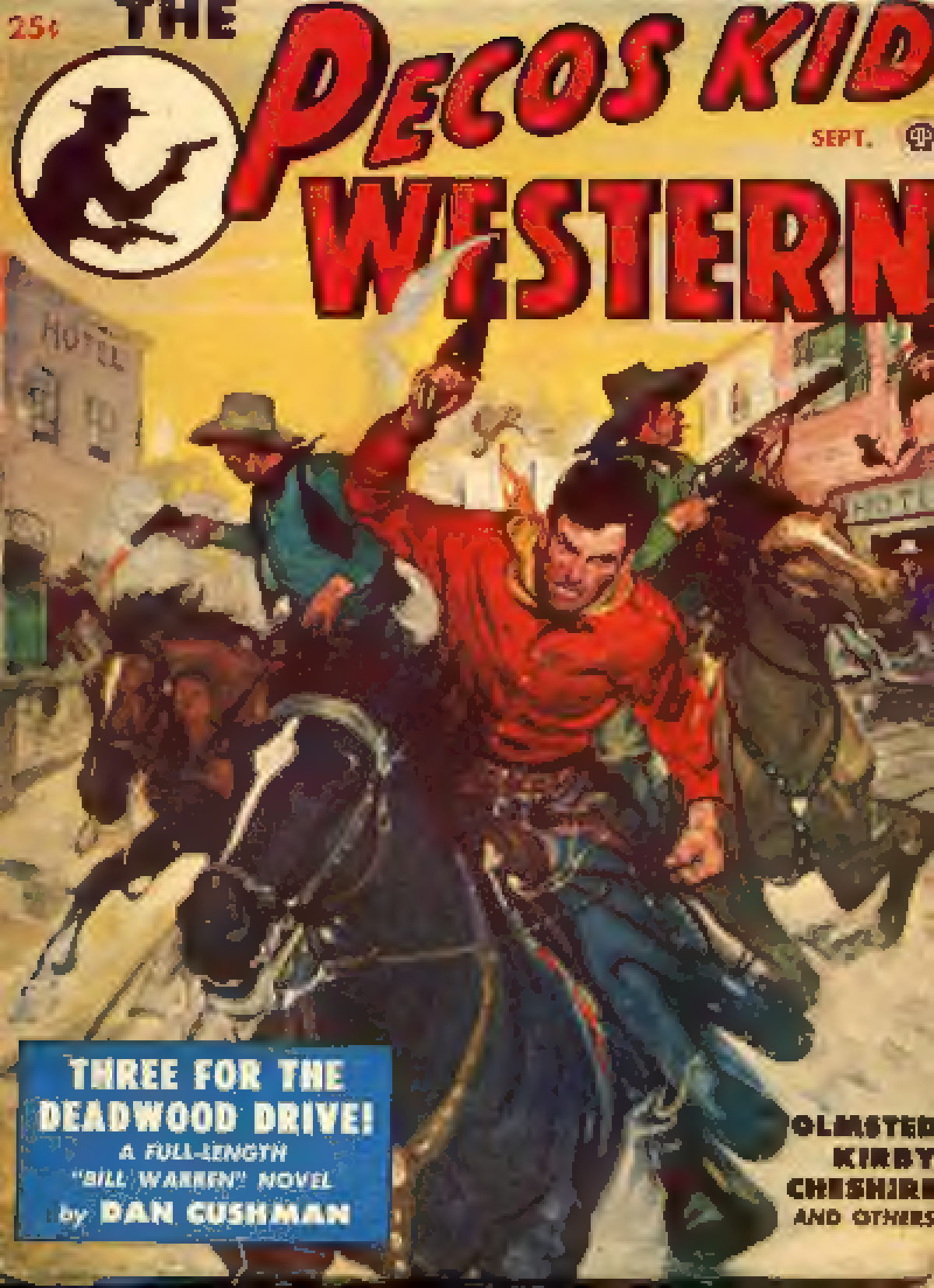

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A FULL-LENGTH "BILL WARREN" NOVEL

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Two killers held the key to Jackson's salvation—and his destruction.

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When you deliver a death warrant, be sure it ain't marked with your own name!

THREE BIG COW-COUNTRY FEATURES

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This is where all hands light and fill up on some good habla, amigos.

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THE ROARING TOWNS.....Blakeslee and Robbins 108
Soya, Texas—a town as tough as the six hell-bent Soyas it was named after.

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The Pecos Kid Western [v1 #2, September 1950] (25¢, 132pp, pulp)

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10 · Three for the Deadwood Drive [The Pecos Kid] · Dan Cushman · na

67 · Wagon-Train Judgment · Clark Gray · ss

75 · Bullet-Checked · Giff Cheshire · ss

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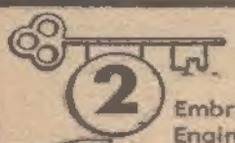

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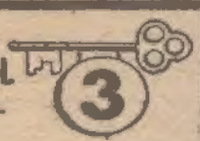

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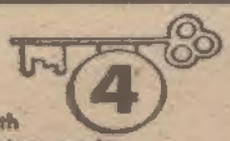

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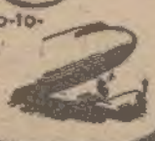

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First of all comes a letter from a gent in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Jim Harkness is his name. Glad to have you here with us, Jim.

Dear Editor:

Congratulations on your new magazine, *The Pecos Kid*. I picked up a copy the other day in town, and started reading the way you do sometimes—kind of half conscious and half unconscious. Then I began to notice things in passing, like the mention of Miles City in Montana, and this Dan Cushman's description of the Yellowstone country. I figured he must have lived out this way, one time or another. Writes real stuff.

I've been all through the Yellowstone country myself—Billings, Miles City, Livingston, places like that. It's a real pleasure to read somebody you know's been there, too. Somebody who's got the feel of the country and the real West.

Will look forward to more adventures of the Pecos Kid, and his side-kicks Hernandez Flanagan, and the Big Jim Swing.

Good luck.

Jim Harkness

(Continued on page 8)

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Harte. A Western is a Western, brother, and that's why we read them.

This isn't a sour note, it's just an observation. Keep the Pecos Kid coming. I'll read every one that hits the stands. I guess I'm just a dyed-in-the-wool Western fan.

Harold Johnson

We didn't mean to imply we were trying to strip the Western story of all its color, vigor, or its authentic action, Hal. And if you lump The Pecos Kid in the class of Zane Gray, Clarence Mulford, Bret Harte, that's fine with us. We'll keep them coming as long as there's appreciative readers like you around.

Dear Editor:

I liked the pictures illustrating the Pecos Kid. How about more pictures—maybe ten or twelve every issue? They would be good to look at.

E. Kennedy,
East Liverpool,
Ohio.

Well, that's about it today, folks. Drop a line to the *Pecos Kid Western* if you'd like to get anything off your chest—anything adverse, perverse, or diverse. This is the place to let loose steam.

Next issue is on the stands Sept. 27... Until then—*hasta la vista!*

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CHAPTER ONE

The Big Trail Drive

THERE WERE the three of them, and they'd traveled a long way. On one side rode Big Jim Swing, on the other was Hernandez Flanagan with his guitar wrapped in a slicker behind his saddle, and in the middle was William Calhoun War-

The cattle thundered into the clearing, piling over themselves, plunging ahead.

ren whom no one north of Texas knew by any other name than the Pecos Kid.

On reaching the dusty main street of Maverly, the Kid called a halt, and sat at ease in the saddle, his hat slid back, its sweatband printed in a wet circle around his unruly, brick-red hair. The street lay quiet under the late sun of the Wyoming afternoon.

"Maverly!" breathed Hernandez Flanagan, his eyes almost closed, just the tips of his white teeth showing. "City of my dreams, weeth its gay women, its pitfalls of pleasure!"

Jim Swing, hearing him, took new interest in the town. It still wasn't much. There were thirty false-fronted buildings packed together as though, with all the public domain of Wyoming for the taking, these square feet were precious—and beyond, just the shacks, sheds, and rubbish heaps that were common to frontier towns everywhere.

Big Jim said in a voice that was unexpectedly treble, "Gosh, Butch, it don't look big enough for many o' them pitfalls."

"So it is not beeg like Dodge City and New York. So it has only seex pitfalls instead of twelve, we will have to visit each of them twice." He looked over at the Kid. "Eh, Keed, for ninety miles with nothing but water to drink you have told us of thees old friend, thees man, who waited to drop in your pocket the potful of pesos. Where is he now with his pesos? He has blue eyes, thees man? His name is maybe Genevieve?"

"His name's Tom Mace, he's sixty, and he's laying low because somebody would like to shoot the top of his head off."

"A coach robber? He said where his hideout was?"

"Yonder." With his cigarette, the Pecos Kid indicated the big, ornate, ramshackle hotel across the street. "And he's no coach robber."

"Thees place?" Hernandez drew his Colt. "A wager, señor! Ten dollars!"

His gun exploded atop the last word, and the bullet sped with a long lifetime of practice, smashed one of the knobs that adorned a railing on the second-story veranda.

The Pecos Kid cursed him, but there was a wild light in his blue eyes as he drew and shattered the knob next to it.

Hernandez's horse reared. He leaped from the saddle, and shouting "Twenty" shot out the next one.

The Kid got a second and third in rapid succession, but Hernandez's third bullet missed.

Hernandez, now miserable, sat down on a platform, drew out a black book, and, wetting a stub pencil with his tongue, painstakingly inscribed a figure.

"Señor, I am much in debt. To you alone, the sum of feefty thousand, four hundred thirty dollars, and seex beets."

The eruption of gunfire brought men from every doorway. One, a tall, grim-jawed man wearing a marshal's star, strode up to say, "If you Texas boys have an idea you're going to tear this town apart—"

"That'd be too small a task for men o' our talents, constable," the Kid said with a grin that took fatigue and hardness off his face. "You're looking on three men that just took Denver apart, and they're *still* looking for the roof off Bat McQuade's Temple Bar."

Then, telling Big Jim to keep Hernandez out of trouble, he turned his back on the marshal and walked in his saddle-sprung manner across to the hotel.

A SHORT, fat man with huge ears and wattles like a bullfrog's met him in the door and cried in broken German, "You know how much dot millwork cost me? Sixty cents a foot, laid down in Cheyenne, *ja*, and I had to freight it here yet. Why does everybody chop down my place mit bullets when they want target practice? What you cowboys deserve is a

forkful of hay in back of the horses, not a bed in a first-class hotel."

"Sorry." The Kid looked as if he meant it. "I thought that's what you put them little knobs up there for."

"Well, ve didn't. You re perhaps looking for a room?"

The lobby was dim, filled with the musty smell of floor oil. The Pecos Kid stood in the door for a while, letting the sun-brightness get out of his eyes. Then he followed the German across to a desk flanked on both sides by dusty, potted palms.

"Tom Mace staying here?"

The man had his back turned. He flinched as though the words had force when they hit him.

"Tom Mace!" He turned and let both his beefy fists strike the desk in unison. "You ask me about *Tom Mace*. I ask you who is going to pay the two days' room rent he left owing?"

Mace had never run out on a chippy debt like that in his life. Pecos was about to say so, but he sensed something was wrong. With his eyes, and with his expression, the German was trying to tell him something. A man was seated by the front window, listening.

Pecos didn't turn immediately to look. He examined the burned-out end of his cigarette, snapped a match to light on his thumbnail, and turned quite casually while applying it to the cigarette.

The man was spare and rocky faced, with high cheeks and small eyes. His holster was tied down gunfighter style on his right thigh.

The Kid turned back again. Placing himself so the gunman couldn't see what he was about he drew from his shirt pocket a letter from Mace that the stage driver had delivered to him at Point of Rocks. He unfolded it one-handed, placed it for the Dutchman to read. Then he drawled to fill up time.

"Tom's sure enough a crook. Owes me eighty in trail-drivin' money since last August, and any man that'll beat you out of trail drive money is next thing to a carpetbagger. I was hoping to catch him here and collect."

Pecos returned the pencil-scrawled note to his pocket, and the German, without changing position, lifted from under the counter a key wired to a big wooden tag. Holding it carefully, so the key wouldn't jingle, he slipped it inside the Kid's shirt.

His face had been florid, then pale, and now florid again. Sweat glistened on his broad cheeks. He took a very deep breath, and blew it out.

The Pecos Kid drawled, "What was Tom doing here, anyhow? Last I heard, he was running a little haywire spread down by Bear Creek, buying fallen stock off the trail herds."

"He vas—mit trail herd outfit." The German was having a hard time getting words through his lips. He was afraid of the gunman. So afraid he was sick. The Pecos Kid knew how it was. He'd seen times like that himself. "He—haff some trouble. *Ja.* Got shot, through hips. Mine bed he slept in. Mine whiskey he drank. Then one day—pfft! He is gone and I am holding bag filled with nothings."

THE Pecos Kid thanked him and walked to the bar. It was empty. He took the key from his shirt, glanced at the tag. Number twenty-six. That would probably be on the second floor. There'd be some back stairs. He'd wait until dark.

The bartender was outside. When he came in, the Kid asked for a bottle of St. Louis beer. The bartender took a small pony glass for himself and said, "You're the Pecos Kid, aren't you? You don't remember me, but I tended bar at Corbus City all during the cattle war. I was there the day you shot it out with Nelson Spangelo in the middle of main street. I was there the day the militia took you, and the Spaniard, and about fifteen more down

to Fort Ludloe, too. What ever happened down there, anyhow?"

The Kid drank beer looking at him and through him. "I forget. I dug a deep hole, and scraped all that ruckus inside it."

In the lobby, the gunman had shifted position and was watching him. "Who is he?" Pecos asked, indicating with a slight jerk of his head.

The bartender looked surprised that he didn't know. "That's Ed Ward."

"Live here in Maverly?"

"No, he hit town a couple days ago."

The Pecos Kid drifted down the street, ate at Hong Gim's San Francisco Beanery, watched faro at the Green Front. It was late twilight then. He stepped from the back door of a saloon, and circled sheds and rubbish heaps to the hotel.

Lamplight came from the kitchen, but the upper floors were dark. He climbed an outside stairway to the second floor, and paused inside a darkened hall to look back. A cowboy rode cut-across toward main street and disappeared. No one else. No one had followed him.

It was too dark to make out the room numbers. He lighted a match, found number twenty-six. "Tom!" he said, with his lips close to the panel. "Tom, are you there? It's Pecos."

He heard movement—someone changing position in bed. Then Tom's voice. It sounded husky. "You got a key?"

"Yeah." He turned it in the lock, opened the door, stepped inside. A faint light came through the window. The air was filled with the odor of liniment. He closed the door after him. Then he saw a gleam of gunmetal. Tom Mace was propped up in bed, a .45 Colt in his hand. "What the hell, Tom!"

Tom laughed with a relaxation of taut nervousness and laid the revolver on the blankets between his knees. "I thought maybe somebody'd walked you up here with a gun at your back. That damn Kiowa would do anything."

"Who?"

"Kiowa Johnny. He was one of Mixler's handymen. I had some trouble with him. He's around, ain't he?"

"I thought Kiowa got killed at Redpath, two years ago. Only gunman I saw was a fellow named Ed Ward."

"*Him!* Well, I guess he's just as bad." With a groan and a curse, Tom elbowed and squirmed to a sitting position. "Pull the shade, Kid, and light the lamp. I want to have a look at you."

THE LIGHT, after long darkness, made Tom shade his eyes. He was a middle sized man. He could have been any age between fifty and eighty. His skin was cured a Spanish-leather brown and judging by his flecked eyeballs and scraggly whiskers, he had Indian blood.

The Kid shook his hand and asked, "What the hell *is* all this?"

"It's perfectly human. I just want to live for a while, and I stand a better chance if they think I'm in Cheyenne."

"If it's just Ed Ward and Kiowa Johnny—"

"Now Kid, don't get on the prod. I need you for bigger things than feeding lead to a couple of cheap gunmen. Open the bureau drawer. There's a couple of articles, one for you and one for me."

The bureau contained a blue-edged legal paper, and a pint of Old Haversill's bourbon.

The Kid said, "Take your choice."

"I'm no idiot. I'll take the likker."

The Pecos Kid sat down by the light and read. The paper, sealed by a notary, signified that Mr. ————, better known as The Pecos Kid, was 51 per cent owner of nine hundred longhorn cattle bearing the Rocking A brand, then somewhere on the trail in Wyoming Territory.

"What does this mean?"

Tom Mace let the whiskey shake the chill from him and said. "It means what it says. Those cattle are half yours. Catch

up with the trail herd and claim 'em. Mixler's a hungry grizzly, but he'll honor that paper. Just fill in your real name. It's Bill Warren, ain't it?"

"I'll be glad to claim your cattle for you, but half's too much."

"A half is too little. Now keep quiet, and I'll make you agree. I threw 'em in with Mixler's outfit on account of the Injuns. Now, Mix is taking his herd across the Yellerstone to Deergrass Valley, but you and *our* steers will turn off at the Belle Fourche and cross the divide to Sundance Creek. From there—"

"From there, Sitting Bull's squaws will start making jerky."

"It might be, and again it might not. You make the gamble. Start out at dark and drive all night. Pocket the herd by day in one of those deep gulches coming down from the Black Hills, and don't show till next night. You get 'em to Deadwood. Those miners have been living on beans and jackrabbit ever since Sitting Bull left the Agency. A nine dollar steer will be worth a hundred in that camp."

He rose up in bed as though he expected Pecos to contradict him. "Yes, I said a hundred! And they'll take the whole herd at that price. There's twelve thousand miners in the Black Hills, army estimate, and nine hundred steers won't go too damned far."

The Pecos Kid grinned and said, "Why, for that kind o' scratch, they're practically in Deadwood right now."

"Good." Tom had another small snort from the bottle. "I'd give you one out of this, but the Dutchman that runs this shebang has got me rationed at a pint a day. Got an idea I'll get drunk and start whoopin' around so those gunhawks will know where to come and finish me off."

Mixler, the Kid was thinking. Mixler of the Leon, down in Texas. He could even remember the brand—Bar M, made in the manner generally referred to as an M-on-a-rail.

He said, "You mean Mixler's out on the trail?"

"Not only Mixler. The Haltmans are drifting to new pasture, too. Carpetbaggers ruined that country, and drought finished the job. Why, that range between Red Fork and Brazos is picked clean as the floor in a Chink beanery."

"Mixler tried to kill you?"

"Oh, hell no. I had trouble with some o' the men. Kiowa and a long-tail lobo by the name of Andy Rasmussen got the idea I intended getting army law on 'em for a Missouri Pacific mail car robbery they pulled back in '72, and so they tried to put me out of the way. I knew I wouldn't stand any more chance than liker at a Blackfeet camp meetin' if I stayed with the herd, so when they got me through the hips in a bushwhack one night, I lit out.

"Sometime I'll be up and around and I'll gun down both of them, but that can wait. I been kicking around this country for a heap of years without one gold piece to rattle against another, and now I see the chance, I don't want to draw out of the game. You take those steers through for me, Kid. You, and Big Jim and the Mex. You can do it if anybody can. The Mex *is* along, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then put him out at the point. No Sioux will harm one hair of a crazy man."

CHAPTER TWO

Deadfall at Maverly

HE WAS at Tom's room for an hour. When he came out, the last luminous light of evening had left the sky. The moon hadn't risen. He had to grope his way down the stairs and through the alley. He circled a Chinese washee and came back to the street. The marshal was standing outside a saloon, waiting for him.

"Hold up a minute," he said, and walked

that way. "I've been told that you're the Pecos Kid."

"They call me that."

"Well, let me tell you something—we don't back up very easy at reputations in this town. We had plenty of Texas men try to take it apart, and we're still here."

"You're borrowin' trouble, Marshal." With his hat back from his unruly hair and a grin on his face, it was hard to imagine the Kid having carved a reputation anywhere. "We shot off a few knobs, but if it'd make you feel better, you pick up the pieces and I'll have Big Jim Swing glue 'em back on."

"I'm not talking about that target practice. I'll be so damned glad when those knobs get all shot off so they aren't a challenge to every cowboy on the wahoo . . . What I'm talking about is that mean-ornery Greaser pal of yours. You get him on his horse and get him out of town, do you hear?"

"Why?"

The *why* was accompanied by a slight narrowing of the kid's eyes, and the marshal eased the aggressiveness of his tone. "It's not for my good, or anybody's in Maverly, but for his own. He's headed for trouble, and a whole lot more'n he can handle."

"You'd be amazed, seh, how much trouble that greaser, as you call him, can handle."

"He's making love to Terry Slavin's wife. Does that mean anything to you?"

Slavin, as a gambler and dance hall operator, was known from the Rio to the Yellowstone. The Kid had heard he was a gunman. He'd heard that about lots of people.

"Why, I wouldn't want anything to happen to Slavin, I sure wouldn't. Where's all this taking place?"

"At Slavin's place—the Dublin Bar."

They walked together toward the Dublin, a rambling, flimsy place, two years old and already warped out of shape. As he neared, he heard the rapid twanging of a guitar and the musical lilt of Hernandez's voice. He found himself walking in time. He wanted to close his eyes and hum the tune. That Mick-Spick could sing. He could sing like nobody the Kid had ever heard.

"Por mi amiga señorita,"
the words came through the cool night air,
"La vida y el corazon."

"You hear that?" the marshal cried. "Do you think Slavin's going to stand for some Mex making love to his wife?"

THERE was a good crowd in the place, a combination saloon, hotel, and music hall commonly referred to as a shebang. Hernandez, near the back of the big room, was standing with one ornate boot on a chair, plucking the guitar and singing to a thin featured, pretty woman in scanty spangles who was taking her ease, roosting on the edge of an unused card table, swinging a foot in time with the song.

"That Mrs. Slavin?" he asked the marshal. "She took off her Mother Hubbard someplace along the line, didn't she?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean Slavin shouldn't have his wife in this bird cage, dressed like one of the girls, unless he expects her to be treated like one."

"This is Slavin's place. He'll do what he likes. I tell you, he'll kill a man for that. You Johnny-Rebs are always complaining about us Northerners giving you a raw deal. Now here I am trying to save your hides and—"

"Us Johnny Rebs can take care of ourselves." As though to prove it, the Kid let out a rebel yell, and with Hernandez's answer ringing in his ears, he walked to the bar and called for a drink. Big Jim Swing, hearing him, rushed over.

"Kid, he's headed for trouble. Hernandez is. That Slavin's bad medicine. He can shoot out the eye of a snake at ten paces."

"Yeah, but can he name which eye, like Hernandez?"

"It's nothing to joke about, Kid. He'll get shot dead."

Pecos had seen the big fellow in a rage tear a place like this apart practically with his bare hands, but he was sentimental, especially with Hernandez whom he liked to mother, and at this moment he was practically in tears.

"Kid, we got to get him out of here. He ain't got good sense like we have."

"Your old man owns half the cows in California—if *you* had good sense you'd have stayed there with your feet under his table. Let's have a drink."

Hernandez was singing,

"Ay, ay, ay, ay!
Canta no llores!"

and the woman, climbing to the table, started to swing her scantily clad body in a willing but misguided imitation of a fandango.

Hernandez finished with a grand chord of all the strings and lowering the guitar cried, "Señorita! I have seen the fandango in Ciudad Chihuahia, I have seen it in Monterey, but never like thees tonight. You are the spirit of wine, you are the gazelle of the prairie. I will kiss your slippered toe, señorita. I will kiss your ankle, I will kiss your knee, I will—"

"Get your claws off'n her, you dirty greaser," a man shouted.

SLAVIN had come inside, leaving the batwing doors flapping behind him. He was about forty, heavy and florid. A pearl-gray hard hat roosted on the back of his head, he wore a pearl-gray vest that would cost a month of cowboy's wages, and across its front was a massive gold chain that no cowboy could have bought in a year. His coat was open, revealing the pearl butts of two long-barrelled Smith and Wesson .44's.

"Eh?" cried Hernandez as the crowd scattered. "And who are *you,* señor?"

"I'm Slavin, and I don't even bother to cut notches for Mexicans." The woman was down from the table. She screamed. Slavin shouted, "Get away from him Queenie, I don't want you getting blood on your new dress."

Slavin's hands dangled from long arms, the arms from sloping shoulders. He started to draw with an upward swing of his big body, straightening and taking one step back.

Hernandez, looking casual, had seen it coming. His Colt was out, aimed across his body.

Crying, "A wager, Señor Keed," he fired. The bullet tore along the floor, leaving Slavin's boot sole in shreds, and sent him reeling. From the bar, the Pecos Kid drew and blasted the heel of Slavin's other boot.

The twin bullet shocks, coming from crossed directions, knocked the saloonkeeper's feet from under him and left him momentarily baffled. One of his guns had fallen, the other was pinned under him.

Jim Swing said, "Let's get the hell out of here."

The place, after a few seconds of shock, was in turmoil. A bartender came up with a double-barrelled shotgun, but men blocked him at the end of the bar. Others, employees of Slavin's, were among the card tables. Big Jim charged, hurling lesser men from his way, seized Hernandez by the arm, and started dragging him to the rear door.

"My guitar!" cried Hernandez.

"I got it."

The Pecos Kid followed with his gun still drawn, on the lookout for someone who might have found a vantage point on a table or along the stairs.

Hernandez, still trying to get free, was saying, "Your solicitude ees very touching, amigo, but you are pulling my arm out by the roots."

"I ain't going to let you get killed. Not with all that money owing me."

Darkness stopped them for a few seconds. A cellar had once been dug back of the Dublin, and now it was half filled with ashes and empty bottles. A catwalk had been built on prop-poles between the cellar and the rear of the building. They hurried along it and cut back toward the street.

People ran past them toward the Dublin. "Where are you taking me?" Hernandez kept asking.

The Kid said, "We're getting out of town."

"Do you theenk I will let that Irishman chase me from town? I am an Irishman too, señor, the half part of me, though whether the best or the worst part I do not know."

"You've inherited the worst traits of both races. Anyhow, I don't give a damn for Terry Slavin. Something else has come up. Do you want to stay a no-good saddle bum all your life?"

"I don't know about Butch," Big Jim said in his treble, "but I want to get rich."

"What fool talk is thees? Are you not both put down in my little book for perhaps feefty thousand dollars? And is it not true that I, Herandez Pedro Gonzales y Fuente Jesus Maria Flanagan, always pays his debt?"

JIM said, "Oh hell, Butch, I know you mean well, but where'll you ever get that much money?"

"One day in the faro game, it will be like thees—"

The Kid said, "I'll tell you how you'll get the money. We have a half interest in nine hundred longhorns trailing east of here, and if we can put 'em in Deadwood without leaving our hair on Sitting Bull's medicine stick, even Hernandez can pay up his debts."

"Ha, now *you* are fooling, Señor Keed. There is not in all Wyoming territory enough pesos to pay up the debts of Hernandez. For my debts have both my father and my mother's people keek me out. For my debts have I fled Coahuila and Chihuahua both. Has ever been a man burdened down with debt as your poor Hernandez?"

The Kid asked Jim where he'd left the horses, and Jim guided them across the W-M wagon freight yards toward a feed stable.

The Kid looked careless as usual, but he'd been on the lookout for trouble since leaving Tom Mace's room. When neither Kiowa Johnny or that hard-eyed gunman, Ed Ward, were around, he'd felt a strong premonition of danger. A quarterway across the yard, his eyes caught the moon glimmer of blued steel, and he reacted instantly, ramming Jim one way and Hernandez the other, himself diving forward to the hard-baked earth.

Gunfire from two points tore the night with flame and concussion. He felt the wind-roar of lead as it passed close over him. His gun was out, but he checked the impulse to fire back. His own movement, the divergent points of flame in the dark, for a moment baffled him. He was on one knee when the guns blasted a second time.

This time he pinned them down. He fired as fast as his thumb could hook the hammer, fired on the move, from one knee, from a standing position, from one knee again.

The Kid ended in the partial protection of timbers supporting the W-M water tank. No shooting now. A wooden-bladed windmill was turning with a dismal creak. Night or day, the wind always blew in Wyoming. Water dripped on him. On one knee, he punched empty cases from the magazine and reloaded.

He'd left his own gunsmoke behind, and now it blew past him with a sulphury odor. His eyes, searching the shadows, could see nothing of the ambushers. Big Jim and Hernandez, he knew, were in shadow behind some shattered barrels and packing cases.

They'd picked a suicide spot. A bullet could cut through the whole flimsy mass.

He was ready with his gun loaded. He circled the tank, the long watering trough. The freight shed with its high loading platform was about forty steps away. With his gun poised he sprang into the open, covered the distance with long, running strides.

The Pecos Kid

He was met by a volley from beneath the platform. Darkness and his own movement saved him. He dropped to one knee by one of the piles which supported the warehouse and fired back at their powderflashes.

"Jim!" he shouted while his body rocked with the gun. "Get the hell out of that rat's nest!"

He was fired empty. He moved back, again punching out the empties. Powder fouling made the ejection mechanism hard to operate. He glimpsed Jim as he circled the rear fence.

"Where's Hernandez?"

"That damn greaser! You know what he did? Went back after his guitar! I shouldn't have let him. I should have knocked him over the head and drug him whether he liked it or not."

"Quit worrying about him. He'll live to be eighty and die in bed of rheumatism."

They waited crouched in the shadow of the rear fence. No more sign of the ambushers. They'd probably kept retreating beneath the freight shed. Shooting had brought men from the rear doors along Main Street. Some of them shouted questions, but nobody risked his life by investigating.

"Señores?" It was Hernandez, coming around through the dark.

"Here."

"Ha, you see, I have rescued it." He was rubbing dirt off the guitar. He kissed it. "My sweetheart. Did you theenk your Hernandez would go away and leave you? Keed, what is happening to thees country? It is going to the dogs that they should shoot a man for playing the guitar and making love?"

Pecos said, "I don't want to hurt your pride, but *this* bushwhack wasn't Slavin's doing, and it didn't have anything to do with Slavin's wife. They weren't after you. They were after me."

"But why?"

"Nine hundred head of beef. That's just a guess. Maybe somebody else would like to try delivering it to Deadwood."

They saddled and hunted backstreets through town until the broad sweep of moonlit prairie lay ahead of them to the north.

"Just the same," said Hernandez, "those bullets came very close to my guitar."

CHAPTER THREE

Twelve Thousand Head

THEY SLEPT under the stars, and late the next day, after crossing the Chugwater, sighted a long, gently drift-

ing haze of dust against the northeastern horizon.

The Pecos Kid regarded it with a critical eye and said, "It's the trail herd, all right, and she's a big one. Sweet name o' hell. It *is* a big one!"

"How beeg?" Hernandez asked.

"Twelve thousand, according to Mace."

"Twelve thousand head in one herd! He is a liar, I theenk."

"You picked a good distance to start calling Tom Mace a liar. If he said twelve thousand, he meant twelve thousand."

"Saints of my ancestors! Thees is then the grandfather of all trail herds. Such a herd will pick the land of Montana as bare as a new-born baby in one year."

"They'll play hell picking Montana bare in one year. You stretch all the mountains and canyons out flat and Montana'd be bigger than Texas."

At Gooding's Coulee they found waterholes trampled to knee-deep ooze. Late in the evening, they crested high country overlooking the North Platte, and caught their first glimpse of the great herd. It was being bedded down, scattered for miles along the green bottoms, amid willow and cottonwood.

Supply wagons had been drawn into a half circle, and the cook had a fire going. Far upstream, near a bend, were more wagons and a second fire.

Men were still riding. They could hear shouting voices. Mired cattle were still being roped and dragged from the shoal water. As they approached, they saw the carcasses of seven or eight animals drawn up on cottonwood limbs, being quartered.

"Say!" breathed Big Jim. "That is an outfit!"

"It's an outfit when Mixler and the Haltmans change countries. We better get down there before dark. I'd hate to come up at night and start *that* herd to running."

"Wouldn't run from thees good, clear water," Hernandez said.

"You can't tell when a big bunch like that'll run. You can't tell when they'll stop. Remember when that Long 7 herd stampeded through Leasburg, and they had to get the railroad surveyors out to find out where the townsite was?"

The river was treacherous, with a current that was broken up by mudbars. They swam and waded their horses, and got them wet and tired up the steep pitch of the far side.

They'd lost sight of the camp. A man stepped from the brush with a rifle across his arm, saying, "All right, you drifters, stay where y' are. You'll get shot that way, riding in after dark."

"Why?" the Kid asked mildly.

"Injun country."

"Reckon Sitting Bull's got the paint spread pretty thin if he's holding all the ground between here and the little Big Horn."

"We're north of the Platte, and the boss says it's Injun country."

"Then Injun country it is, and you can use three more men."

A MAN somewhere beyond the brush called in a raw, suspicious voice, "Who is it, Billy?"

"Strangers. Three of 'em." Then, to the Kid, "All right, ride in and talk to him."

They threaded their way through brush, guided by the firelight. Eighteen or twenty men were sprawled in a half-circle, drinking coffee. One of them, a rangy, powerful man, was walking toward them. His trousers, from long riding, stuck to the insides of his legs. He had the stiff manner of one, past his middle thirties, who spent most of his time on horseback. Firelight silhouetted him, and struck across his face, revealing the strong lines of his jaw, his prominent nose, his high cheek bones. A gun was strapped high around his waist. Silver conchas decorated the gunbelt and holster, making multiple shines in the fire as he moved.

"Mixler?" the Kid asked, guessing his identity. He dismounted. "I'm called Pecos. This is Jim Swing and Hernandez Flanagan."

His eyes narrowed just a little at the name Pecos, but he made no comment. "Looking for jobs? We're full up, but you're welcome to drift along for your keep."

"We got jobs." He jerked his head, indicating the herd. "Sure, right here. We're taking over the Rocking A for Tom Mace."

Mixler's face, in the long-slanting firelight, became hollow and predatory. His hands came to rest on his hips. Muscles bulged his shoulders, tightened the faded blue material of his shirt. Then his lips peeled back and he spoke,

"You're doing *what?*"

"Taking over the Rocking A. The herd half belongs to us. Here's the paper to prove it."

He drew the paper from his pants pocket and handed it across. Then, pretending not to notice the expression on Mixler's face, he ambled to the fire and said, "That coffee sure enough smells like Texas."

He'd already recognized Star Glynn, a round-faced, very blue-eyed young man who carried upwards of a dozen notches on his gun. Now he spoke and they shook hands.

"Star, I never thought I'd find you punching cows. Whatever happened to that foreman's job you held down with the 3 Bar 0?"

"You know what happened to it. You don't go on workin' for a man that's swung to a cottonwood."

Mixler, holding the paper at right angles to the fire, scanned it rapidly and folded it again. He stood set on his powerful legs for a while, thinking. Then he jerked his head in a nod.

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"

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"It looks to be on the level. They're Tom's cattle. If he wants to give half of them away, that's his business. You're taking them through to the Deergrass, aren't you?"

"No seh. I'm taking 'em to Deadwood, like Tom wanted."

MIXLER said, "From here on, Sitting Bull's warriors will be following us every step to the Yellowstone. If anybody falls back from the herd, he'll be asking for a Sioux tomahawk."

"We'll take the chance, seh."

Mixler controlled himself by taking a very deep breath. Then he laughed with a hard, backward jerk of his head. "Well, I guess it's your hair, and your cows. Maybe you'll change your mind before we reach the Belle Fourche."

"I doubt it, seh."

"Let's wait and see."

They ate leavings from the stew pot, and sprawled on the ground afterward to drink cup after cup of bitter black coffee. Besides Star Glynn, there was Rasmussen, Billy Six-Spot, and Evas Williams, all gunmen at odds with the law and heading to a new range.

Others were drifters, or cowboys who'd worked for Mixler or the Haltmans down in Texas. After a while, two of the Haltman brothers came down and shook hands. From a distance, he glimpsed a girl on the let-down steps of Haltman's wagon, and guessed that it was Lita, their quarterbreed half-sister. Farther up was another camp where the small outfits had their own supply wagons and remuda.

Punchers kept stretching and leaving the fire to hit their bedrolls or pick up mounts from the wrangler to stand first watch. After talking about the trail, Vern Haltman, eldest of the brothers, said, "That's Tom's wagon yonder, and we sort of moved our supplies in with his. We'll get 'em out if you want, or you can just drift like part of the camp."

"Why, that's kind of you." He was thinking how Vern Haltman had changed. He was no longer the arrogant son of a great land owner. He was just an emigrant, moving what he had, and dependent on Clay Mixler for most of it.

"We all take a turn at night herdin'," Vern said, "bosses and everybody. There's three of you, and thet'll break about right."

Ed Mixler had taken a horse from the remuda and came riding down with Lita Haltman. They pulled up short of the fire, and by the ruddy light, the Kid had his first glimpse of the girl's face.

She was about seventeen, dark and pretty. Her tightly cinched trousers accentuated both her slimness and the breadth of her hips and shoulders. She had a certain Oriental cast of countenance. Her hair, divided in two braids that fell down each shoulder from under her flat-brimmed sombrero, made her look more like an Indian than she would have otherwise, but she was only a quarterbreed.

Hernandez, exhaling, started forward, but the Kid elbowed him back, stood and took off his hat. By that time Mixler had brought his big roan horse between the two of them.

An idea occurred to the Kid that made him feel a little bit sick. She couldn't be interested in Mixler. He had a wife in Texas. He was old enough to be her father.

MIXLER said, "From here we'll have to scout for Injuns. You boys know your way around this country better'n most, so there's your jobs cut out for you. Split up your night watch to suit yourselves. That all right?"

Pecos said in his soft drawl, "Whatever you say, seh."

When Mixler rode off with Lita, Big Jim said half joking in his high-pitched voice, "Butch, what do you think of Pecos? I never heard him thet polite to

anybody. I think that raw-boned grizzly has the fear of damnation thrown in him."

"It is the evil eye, señor!"

The Pecos Kid grinned as he sprawled by the fire, his hat down to keep heat from his eyes. "Facts of life, boys. I was three years in the army. Tully's brigade, cavalry, Army of the Mississippi. You learn things in the army. When a man's your commander, you say *Yes, seh,* and do it. A trail herd's like that. We're going through Sioux country, and I'd rather have one poor commander, than twenty good ones. Not that I'm saying Mixler's a poor commander. In that last go-round, a commander is good or not depending on whether he obtains his objective."

Jim said, "According to that, Grant was a better commander than Lee."

The Pecos Kid sat up with his spine stiff as a rifle barrel. "The armies of Lee, as well as those of Beauregard and Bragg, were successful in obtaining each of their military objectives. Speaking, seh, from a purely military point of view, the Army of the Confederate States was victorious. Did you know, seh, that in the final campaign of the wah, Grant lost in casualties more men than Lee had in his entire army?"

Hernandez said, "What foolish talk is thees? In Chihuahua, each odd number year is fought the Civil war. Let me tell you of my uncle, Ramon Telesforo Julio y Aldasoro de Santillo Fuente, we call him Ray for short, he is general, weeth medal from Santa Ana saying *baballero de la Libertad.* Did your Lee have such a medal, *no!*

"I will tell you about thees one campaign. For one hundred days, on Rio Conchos, fighting every day it was not too hot, maneuvering every step like Napoleon, did my uncle lose five hundred men? Did he lose one hundred men? No! He lost *one man.* On the last week of the campaign, this one soldier, this miserable peon, he was bitten by the gila monster. My uncle, el general, he was furious. Thees man he would have shot at sunrise, for breaking his record, but alas, he was already dead."

"Oh, hell!" the Pecos Kid said, and got up. "I'll take the first watch."

CHAPTER FOUR

Wire Fences

IN THE remuda he found some horses carrying the Tom Mace iron, and choosing a big-barreled gray, asked the wrangler to cut him out. With settlements to the north and an army post close by, he knew there was still no Indian danger. He headed up slowly rising ground, watching for Mixler and the girl.

It was quiet, as quiet as it ever is near a great herd. Cowboys, taking it at a slow, singlefooting pace, sang monotonously to the rhythm of the hoofs. Wolves howled from farther out. Fatigue made him doze in the saddle. Suddenly he came awake with the realization that someone had ridden quietly up beside him and was standing there.

It was the girl, and she was alone. "Where's Mixler?" he asked, without thinking.

She sat with her head high. Her eyes, by moonlight, looked black and angry. "I don't know. Do you want him?"

He shook his head. "You scouting for Injuns, too?"

"I was with Callie McCrae. She's been poorly for the last week."

"You mean there are women yonder at the upper camp?"

"Yes. Callie and Mrs. Jason."

"Kids, too?"

"The two Jason boys." Then she asked, "How's Tom Mace?" He knew that question was her real reason for hunting him out.

"He's doing well. What happened to him, anyhow?"

"The Haltmans had nothing to do with it."

"Why, I didn't guess they did."

She knew what had happened, but was unwilling to talk. He didn't question her. They rode together back to camp.

He awoke at gray dawn. The vinegar-tempered cook, whom the boys nicknamed Daddy Bearsign, was banging on a tin pan threatening to feed it to the wolves. No one took his ease at breakfast. Coffee was drunk standing, scalding hot. There was hot bread and sowbelly. Riders kept galloping onto the camp, and Daddy Bearsign kept cursing them for kicking dirt in his cook-pans.

The wagon was hitched and moving while men still ate. They washed plates and cups in the river, rode at a gallop to catch up with the careening wagon, and toss them in the plunder box. The herd was already up, the lead steers climbing trails along the northern bluffs, and Daddy Bearsign had to get ahead of them and drive hard to make the noon campsite before the herd got there.

More and more of the herd got to moving. It climbed the bluffs in sections that joined as the morning wore on and grew hot. Dust rose and drifted in the breeze. Cattle stopped to graze, and men with goads beat them on, shouting an endless "Hi-ha!" Faces and clothes became coated with dust. Men rode with their hats down, masked, with kerchiefs filtering air from the dust that was fine and white as unbleached flour.

Wide of the herd were the other wagons, the tandem supply wagons belonging to Mixler; Tom Mace's low-wheeler driven by young Tommy Haltman; the Haltmans' Conestoga; McCrae in another Conestoga with his sick wife in a bed on the jouncing floor; the outfits of Jason, Reavley, and Wolf Carson; wagons broken down after a thousand miles of roadless prairie, sprung-wheeled and rawhided together.

IN THE heat of afternoon, atop the high prairie, the herd was allowed to spread through bunch grass and sage. They made dry camp, and went on again at dawn, to some flats in a wide-bottomed coulee where bawling cattle pawed water holes to mud and drank the mud.

Big Jim said, "Trouble with a big herd. You need the whole damn Niobrara to water 'em."

There was a meeting at the other camp, and the Pecos Kid walked there on his horse-spavined legs. When he was still fifty yards off he could hear a man's raised, querulous voice, "Then we shouldn't of come. We should of turned off atop the ridge. We'd of dry-camped tonight, maybe, but next day we'd have struck the Sulphur Water."

That was Dave Jason. He was a huge fellow in his late thirties, thick-chested, with hands the size of a blacksmith's. Mixler and Vern Haltman were there, but Jason had turned away from them and was addressing his words to Reavley, McRae, and the other small owners who were sprawled around a fire with empty coffee cups in their hands.

As Pecos approached, he could see that Mixler was furious. His face looked hollow in the underlighting of the fire. It seemed to be all nose and jawbone. He had his legs set, his hands rested against his narrow hips.

He waited until Jason had finished, and said, keeping a tight hold on his fury, "Maybe you think you'd do better running this outfit, Dave."

"I didn't say that. But I got four hundred steers in that outfit, and aside from a beat-up wagon and a team o' work stock, it's all I own. I ain't got any money to pay for water at Willow Crick. I ain't going to give any of my steers to pay for it, either."

"Listen, Dave—"

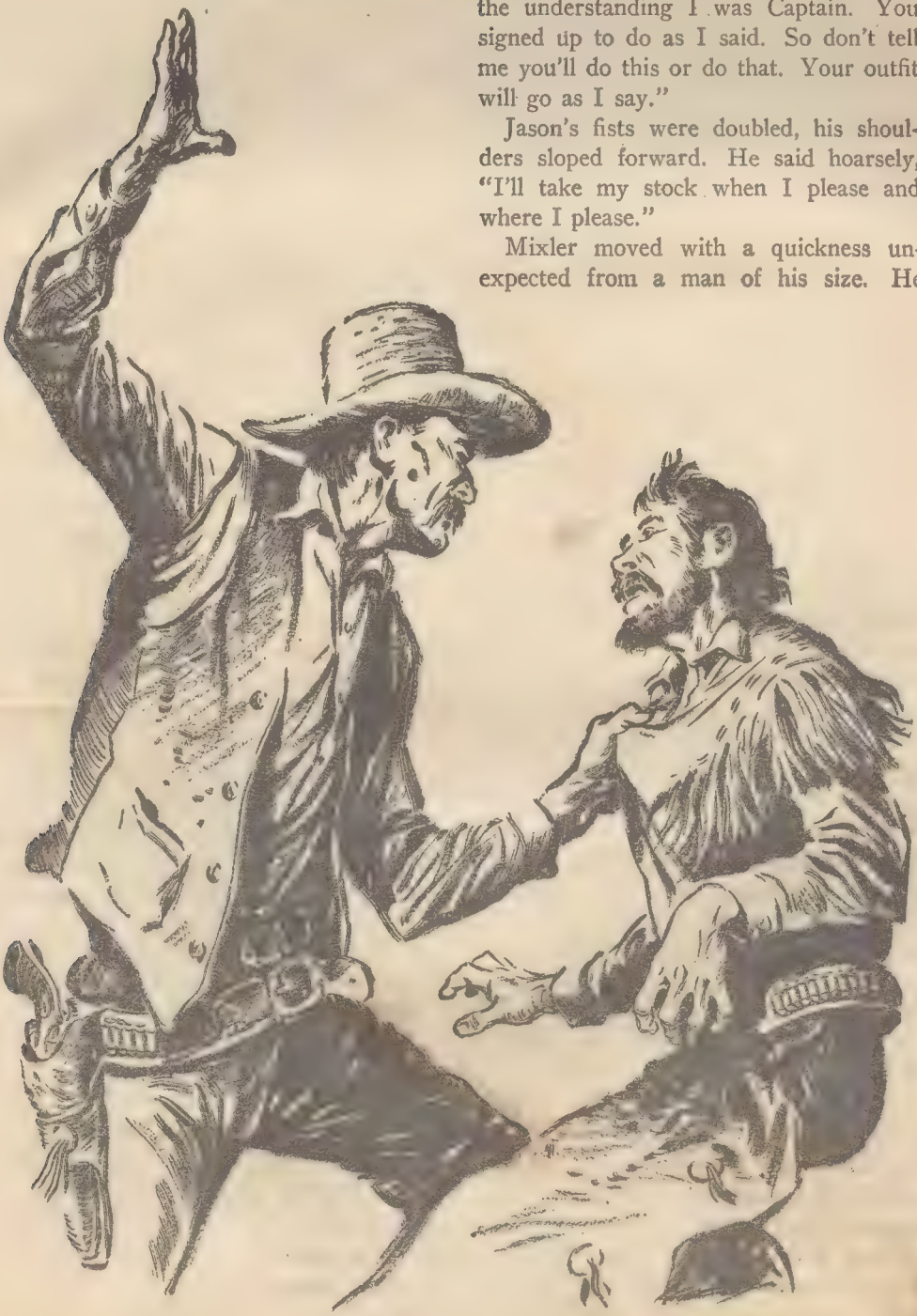
"No, I ain't! We should have turned northeast at the Medicine like a[illegible]e other

herds. I could see their trail yonder. I could see it as plain as day."

"Listen, Dave. Don't tell *me* what you're going to do. You signed up with the understanding I was Captain. You signed up to do as I said. So don't tell me you'll do this or do that. Your outfit will go as I say."

Jason's fists were doubled, his shoulders sloped forward. He said hoarsely, "I'll take my stock when I please and where I please."

Mixler moved with a quickness unexpected from a man of his size. He



Mixler held him and slapped him again and again across the face.

feinted slightly with his left hand, then his right came up with the impact of a swinging sledge.

It caught Jason flush on the jaw. He went down, crumpling on bent knees. Mixler sprang after him. He seized him by the front of the shirt, held him on limber legs, and slapped him repeatedly across the mouth.

Jason's hair, long uncut, strung over his face. His mouth was open. His eyes stared off-focus.

"Don't tell *me* what you'll do!" Mixler flung him away then like a discarded bundle. He hitched his pants high, revealing the power of his legs, and turned on the others. "I've seen this building up ever since we crossed the Little Beaver. I should have settled it before. But we're heading into Injun country, so I'll settle it now. I'll drive this herd over the brink of hell if I want to. If you got suggestions, you make 'em. But *I'm running the herd.*"

ONE of Jason's boys, an eleven-year-old called "Nubbins," darted from among the wagons and got down to lift his father's head out of the dirt. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth, mixed with sweat and dirt and whiskers, and trickled on to the ground. The kid looked up at Mixler and, half crying, started to call him names.

"Ya dirty damn killer. Ya dirty, bully-raggin' son—"

Tall, red-headed, Rio Reavley seized the kid by both shoulders and shook him saying, "Nubbins, keep your mouth shut."

Jason sat up and rubbed his hands back and forth across his eyes. Mixler waited, standing over him, until he'd regained his faculties, then he went on talking, keeping a hard-jawed control on his voice.

"No, I didn't turn west at the Medicine. It'd take us three days out of our way. I'm not tossing away three days and letting somebody else beat us to the Deergrass, because a bunch of lousy Kansas squatters think they can grab the only decent springs this side of the Niobrara and throw fence around it."

Rio Reavley said, "They'll make a fight of it. If they do, they'll hold us up a hell of a lot longer than three days."

"That remains to be seen." He regarded Reavley with narrow eyes. "How about it, Rio? You got any ideas about running this outfit? If you have, this is the time to say so."

"I ain't afraid of you, Clay." Reavley's eyes, traveling, rested on Star Glynn who was slouched in the shadow with one heel hooked in a wagon spoke, his thumbs in his crossed cartridge belts. "I ain't afraid of your gunmen, neither. I knew *who* you were, and *what* you were when I signed up, so I got no kick coming. I'll drift along with you. That don't mean I'll like it, but I'll drift with you."

Mixler spent a few more seconds regarding the truculent faces of the small ranchers, waiting for more voices to be raised. Then, turning, he saw the Pecos Kid.

"Oh, hello, Kid. I was just going to send for you. Mind coming with Vern and me? Rio, you better come, too. We'll ride over and have a talk with those nesters. Maybe we're borrowing trouble. Maybe they'll say, come on boys, and drive your longhorns right through."

CHAPTER FIVE

Sweet Water

AT AN earlier day, when things were booming along the Oregon Trail, wagon trains often swung north from the Platte, and camped a few days along the springs of Willow Creek to repair wagons and fill the bellies of the stock with the rich buffalo grass that grew along the bottoms. Later the springs became a favorite camping spot for wagon trains

headed up the Yellowstone Trail, and for the first herds of Texas cattle.

A couple of years before, however, a group of flat-busted Kansas emigrants had settled, dammed the stream, used the precious water to irrigate spud fields and garden tracts, and erected fences of split cottonwood rails against the northward push of Texas cattle.

Topping a ridge, after an hour and a half of riding, Mixler caught sight of the place and pulled up, saying, "There it is. The sweetest water in Wyoming."

The bottoms were still about three miles away, but the moon was very bright, and a person could make out the shadow marks of fences, cutting them into irregularly shaped fields. Only one cabin was visible. The others had probably been built in the protection of the cottonwoods that stood in massive clumps.

Mixler, after some thought while he rubbed the hard bristle of whiskers on his jaw, said, "It's a sure thing they have the herd spotted. They'll be on the lookout. Might cut loose if we all rode down. I'll go yonder alone. You boys wait here."

He rode away. Big as he was, he was a graceful figure in the saddle. He disappeared over a terrace of the benchland. They saw him again, much later, as he turned and followed the fence. Then he dropped from sight, and for a long time they waited, and listened.

A dog kept barking, miles away. Coyotes howled in answer. There was another long area of silence. Then the barking and howling again.

Star Glynn, nudging his horse up beside the Pecos Kid, said in his smooth voice, "They'll shoot him now if they know when they're lucky."

"What's he got on his mind?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't tell if I did. Mixler don't take well to having his business spilled around."

A little later, Mixler appeared from an unexpected direction.

Reavley called to him, "No deal?"

"Sure, they'll deal. We can drive through five hundred head at a time and water at a fenced-off crossing. A small charge for the whole thing. Matter of a thousand dollars. That's damned cheap, isn't it? A thousand dollars for a belly-ful of water of the public domain?"

Star Glynn laughed in his quiet manner and asked, "How many guns they got to back that up?"

"I only saw three men. There were ten or a dozen down in the bushes."

"What'd you tell him?" Reavley asked.

"What could I tell him? There's the guns, and there's the fence. I told him he could collect tomorrow at sundown."

Reavley cried, "If you think I got eighty-ninety dollars to pay one day's water for stock at these Wyoming water-holes—"

"You don't like it? Well I don't like it either. I don't like it a damned bit."

IT WAS long past midnight when they got back to the wagon. Mixler swung down and called, "Pecos, come here a minute."

The Pecos Kid followed him to the front of the wagon, where he reached beneath the canvas and drew out a half-full quart of whisky. He pulled the cork and handed it over.

"How about it? You got ninety dollars to pay?"

"I haven't got *five* dollars to pay."

Mixler laughed. He waited for the bottle, had a drink. He slapped the cork tight and put it back in its old place. "They'll lower that price tomorrow."

"I doubt they will, seh. Waterin' this herd would destroy a third part of everything they got planted in them bottoms."

Mixler still smiled, but his eyes had narrowed. "What's wrong, Kid? You afraid of those sod-buster guns?"

"I ain't afraid of 'em. I just don't go out o' my way looking for a fight. Is that

why you called me over here, to ask me that?"

"No. I wanted to know what you had against me."

"Nothing, seh."

"What'd Mace say when he signed those steers over to you? Did he say I tried to bushwhack him?"

"Why, I'll tell you what he said. He said Kiowa and Rasmussen tried to bushwhack him. He said he knew too much about some Missouri Pacific mail car robbery."

"Oh." Some of the suspicion seemed to go out of him. His manner became confidential. "You know, I been fighting to keep this outfit from splitting down the middle. There's the Haltmans and me, and there's that bunch of haywire outfits at the upper camp. You're going to have to choose between us, Kid. I think you made your choice already. Which is it going to be?"

Speaking slowly, meeting Mixler's eyes, he said, "I'm like Rio Reavley. I knew you were captain of the herd when I signed up. I knew who you were. I'd heard of you down in Texas. You make the decisions. You ain't telling *me* what to do, but you can tell my cows what to do—from here all the way to the Belle Fourche. There, does that answer your question?"

There was no slight hint of a smile on Mixler's lips now. His eyes were like pieces of gray quartz above his high cheek bones. "Yes," he said. "I guess it does."

The herd was unusually quiet. It was a bad sign. Pecos lay in his blankets, staring at the stars, listening. He could hear night herders making their rounds, singing the endless words of a trail song. He had the feeling that any unexpected sound, or less than that, even the absence of an expected sound would start them up and running. He fell asleep, and it seemed like only an instant later when morning and the stirring camp awakened him.

THE HERD, through rising layers of dust, was up and moving. They rolled northward, topped the low ridge during hot afternoon, and at night, bawling for water, riders brought them to a stop half a mile from the Willow Creek fence.

Cursing with each move, Daddy Bearsign emptied stale water from his barrel into the coffee pot which he suspended over a sagebrush fire. Eight or nine men had gathered for grubpile. Mixler wasn't there. None of the Haltmans were there.

"What the hell's going on here tonight?" Daddy kept saying.

Four men led by Rio Reavley rode down from the other camp. Daddy, wiping sweat from his eyebrows, looked up and said, "If you're looking for water, you can go down to the crick and dip it."

Rio said, "Where's Clay?"

"He never asked me where he can go. I'm just cook here."

Vern Haltman had seen them arrive and rode up at a gallop. "You looking for Mixler? He's down in the valley making a dicker."

"Oh." Rio relaxed a little. He edged his bay bronc close enough so he could look down in the coffeepot. It had just started to boil.

Daddy said, "Well, git down and have yourself a cup. I'll have beef and dough-god maybe. And gravy thickened with traildust. What a hell of a place to camp, right a-hind this herd. I'd like to know where everybody is. They're generally like a band of wolves this time of night."

Rio and the rest were dismounted, drinking coffee, when Mixler came. His eyes dwelt for a moment on Reavley, on the purple-bruised face of Dave Jason.

He said to Daddy, "Put out the fire. Get the wagon hitched." Rio started to say something, but Mixler's raw voice cut him off. "Go back and get your outfits ready to roll."

Rio said, "What the hell—?"

"We're moving across—tonight!"

"How about those nesters?"

"They'll be paid off. They'll get every damn thing they been looking for."

Daddy Bearsign cursed and kicked the coffeepot over on the fire. It was suddenly dark with the flame gone. Still cursing, he started to hurl things in the wagon. Grim-faced and taut-lipped, Reavley and the others rode back to their camp.

The air was lifeless and oppressive. Bullet-colored clouds had risen in the west. There was sheet lightning, distant thunder. For a while the moon shone, then it slid behind layers of clouds.

The herd was slow in bedding down. After an hour, all the wagons were hitched. At both camps, drivers waited in surly, apprehensive silence.

The Pecos Kid looked for the cookfire, found it drowned under the coffee, and Daddy Bearsign in his wagon, ready to move.

"Mixler's orders, and don't ask me why," Daddy shouted.

PECOS roped a fresh mount from the remuda. He rode along the herd until he met Jim Swing.

"What the hell's he up to, Kid? You think he'll pay any money to those nesters?"

"He wouldn't pay 'em a Jeff Davis dollar."

"He's looking for trouble. They're gunned to the teeth."

"They're looking for trouble, too. Anybody that tosses up a fence around water is looking for trouble."

"Just the same, I don't like it. There's women and kids down there."

They sat quietly for a quarter-hour, for half an hour. Riders on the big circle had kept the big herd well bunched on the gently sloping hillsides. Finally they started to bed down, but thunder, and the smell of water kept them nervous, impatient. One big brindle steer was up,

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somewhat downhill from the others, bawling in a never-ending, high-pitched trumpet.

A rider came up from the darkness, shadowy and small. It was Lita Haltman. She drew up with one of her slim movements, and said, "Oh, I thought you were Vern."

Pecos could barely make out the smooth outline of her face. She had her sombrero on the back of her head, held under her throat by a tie-string, and her hair, dislodged by riding, fell in heavy masses around her shoulders. For a few seconds she sat quite straight, the buckle of her belt pressed against the saddlehorn, her dark eyes on him.

Pecos asked her, "What's Mixler up to, anyhow?"

"How would I know what he's up to?" The sharp defensiveness of her voice was a surprise after the long quiet. "I haven't talked to Mixler since morning."

Pecos tilted his head at the valley, now an uncertain mass of shadow below. "Reckon he's yonder, trying to make a deal?"

"No. He's at the wagon."

She touched her spurs to the side of her horse and started away, intending to go around the herd on the downhill side, but a rider came up at a stiff jog and spoke to her.

"Stay out o' there, Miss." The Kid recognized his voice. It was Billy Six-Spot, the same man who had stopped them that first night they rode into camp. "You better get back to the wagon. Vern's looking for you."

Billy rode on, his hat off, mopping sweat off his head with his kerchief. Silence settled again. It became tense, even the brindle steer had stopped trumpeting. It had the feel of a string drawn taut, of a trigger haired until the slightest breath would release it.

Suddenly, from up the slope, came the sound of a galloping horse and the clang-clang of a tin pan being drawn on the end of a lariat rope.

Next instant, as though moved by a common mind, the great herd got to its feet and stampeded. It had been done deliberately, done at Mixler's order.

The earth vibrated. It was like thunder but multiplied a thousand times. Going downhill, the dark sea of cattle split around a little knoll and rejoined, a maddened, bawling mass.

Pecos and Big Jim were caught between one end of the herd and the heavy rail fence. They spurred forward, got clear, and swung back. Dust made the air too thick to breathe. In the darkness, it was like a black fog. They sucked air through folded kerchiefs, guided themselves by sound.

A breeze sprang up, carrying the dense layer of dust away from them. Lightning kept flashing closer, and there were big droplets of rain.

The lead steers, outdistancing the others by a hundred yards, had been turned by the heavy rail fence. Men were below, in the bottoms, shooting. Through dust, the powderflames were ruddy, out of focus. Then the main herd bore down, swept the fence before it, washed in a dark wave across the valley.

Sound of the herd was suddenly far away. They could hear the shouts of teamsters getting the wagons rolling.

Hernandez found them. They fell in with other riders. Ahead of them was the cook wagon, bounding wildly across the rough prairie as Daddy Bearsign stood and whipped the team. The Haltman wagon was at his left, and farther away, approaching at a ten or twelve degree angle, were the wagons from the other camp.

A group of Mixler's men, half a mile to the west, had reached the fence and were met by a scattering of gunfire from the bottoms. They rode on, whooping and shooting, but real opposition failed to

present itself. What defense the sod busters had was trampled or put to flight by the herd.

A cabin, abandoned with a kettle still boiling on the stove, had stood in the midst of the stampede, but sheds and clothes lines and a neatly fenced garden plot had all been pulverized beneath a thousand hoofs.

Hungry, thirsty cowboys went inside, drank the hot water from tin cups, and started going through the cupboards, but Mixler rode up, leaned to look through the door, and said, "Put that stuff back. We're not robbing 'em. We're just watering the herd."

By dawn, the wagons, with barrels filled, had scaled the northern slopes. For hours there'd been intermittent gunfire. It increased as daylight came. A group under Star Glynn fought a rear-guard action as the herd moved, unwillingly at first, then in long, snakelike columns up the draws to benches, and to the high prairie beyond.

CHAPTER SIX

Whipsaw Trap

BY NOON Willow Creek, with a third of its houses and half of its irrigated fields in ruin, lay over a ridge, out of view.

Here the grass, untouched by trail herds, grew deep, so wind currents made wavelike shadows in flowing across it. The herd slowed and spread out, grazing its way, and Mixler brought the wagons to a stop. It was grubpile, after almost twenty-four hours of hunger.

"Thees was pretty rough trick, no?" Hernandez asked, coming to squat behind the Pecos Kid with a plate of beef and dumplings in one hand and coffee in the other. "Some of those people lose everytheeng, just for to save two-three days on the way to Montana. Perhaps not even thees, for now we have rough country ahead, and will have to turn west anyway. I theenk perhaps one day I will shoot thees Mixler through the heart."

The Kid spoke without turning his head. "It was pretty rough. But this is a pretty rough country."

"You theenk he did right?"

"I didn't say that. But he's boss. On the trail you have *one boss.* You do what he says whether you like it or not."

"But all the same, there had better be no more Willow Creeks."

"There won't be. From here on the country belongs to Sitting Bull or anybody who has enough guns to claim it."

There was no trouble during the night. The herd went on, through days of heat. A "dry rain" rose in the west almost every afternoon with black clouds, thunder, and once or twice a cooling draught of moisture. There was water at Claus Coulee, at Henderson Creek, at the Niobrara. The country became rough, gashed by steep-sided coulees running northeastward toward the Black Hills.

Night and day, Pecos, Jim, and Hernandez scouted for Indians. There were signal smokes and some cold sign, but nothing to give much alarm. Sitting Bull was said to have most of his forces to the north and east of the Black Hills, trying to cut off supplies from the gold miners.

At night when they rode in they could sense discontent rising among the small outfits. Mrs. McCrae was sick and getting worse. The wagon under her was being beaten to pieces by the rocks and gully crossings of the route Mixler had chosen.

Below, to the west, one's eyes could rove the flat prairie generally chosen by trail herds, where a wagon could roll easily, mile after mile, without a pitch or a draw, but Mixler kept swinging away from it.

On the third night from Niobrara,

with men sprawled in the heat of Daddy Bearsign's fire, there was a jingle of bridle links and six men from the other camp rode up.

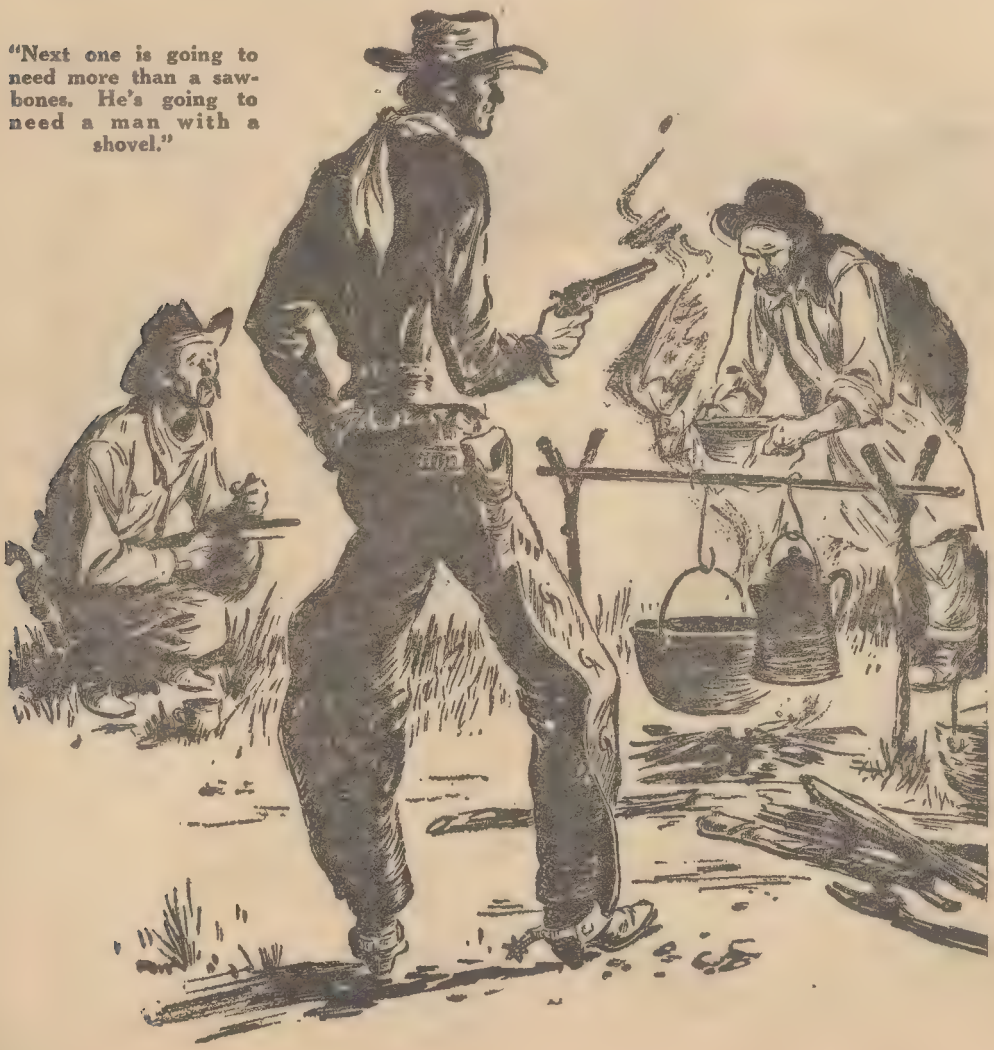
Rio Reavley, looking more gaunt than ever, swung down and walked on stiff, gangling legs toward Mixler, who was seated on the wagon tongue.

REAVLEY was scared of Mixler, like almost everybody else, and to keep from showing it, he made his voice aggressive and brassy, "What the hell you trying to do, Mixler, put us all afoot?"

Mixler took time to finish picking his teeth. He snapped his clasp knife shut and turned. He looked at Reavley, and beyond, at Jason and McCrae, and gray-whiskered Wolf Carson.

"No, I'm not trying to put you afoot. And I'm not worrying about it, either. These cattle are what I'm worried about. I'm taking 'em by the shortest route, and I'm taking 'em through the best grass. The best water. You follow any way you can. If your wagons give out, try riding on horseback. Maybe you'll end by crawling on your bellies. That's your lookout."

"We got kids along. McCrae's wife's sick."



"Next one is going to need more than a sawbones. He's going to need a man with a shovel."

"Nobody asked Jason to bring his whelps, nor McCrae his wife."

"Damn it, though, when there's an easier way to the west—"

"If you knew an easy way you should have taken it and not joined up with me."

Reavley started to shout back in anger, but Gayle McCrae, a beat-out little man, was in ahead of him. "Is it too much if a man asks where you're headed?"

"No. I'll tell you where we're going. Right now we're headed for the upper Warbonnet. We'll cross it by the old Fur Company trail."

"How about Windham Coulee?"

"We're crossing that by the Fur trail, too."

"There ain't crossing *there* for a wagon."

Mixler's voice had become deadly. "Who told you that?"

McCrae hesitated, but Wolf Carson said, "I did."

"You the one that's behind all this dissension, Wolf?"

Reavley shouted, "No, he's not. I'm the one behind it, if you want to know. You've taken the tough road instead of the easy one ever since we left the Little Beaver. When Tom Mace objected, you tried to kill him. When Jason said something, you beat him half to death with your fists. Well, by the gawds you ain't scared *me* out.

"I'll say what I think. It's this—you're trying to make it so almighty tough no wagon can follow you. You think because there's women and kids along, we'll have to shuck out. You think you can make us do it one after another and drive the whole shebang through to the Deergrass all by yourself."

He was backing away as he talked. Mixler, rangy, with his bull neck and powerful shoulders sloped forward, followed him. Rage had turned Mixler's face an ashen color under his tan. His arms had thickened, tightening the denim material of his shirt. His hands, at the ends of long arms, were stretched down.

Looking casual, the Pecos Kid stood up. He backed away from the fire a trifle. His eyes swung to the shadows. He saw Andy Rasmussen, gangling, stooped, his hand half lifting his Colt from its holster. There were others, a man on each side—Star Glynn and Evas Williams.

"Man behind you, Reavley!" he said softly.

His voice jarred the long, taut seconds of silence. Reavley had been ready to draw. He checked himself, spun and saw Rasmussen. He saw the others. He got his hands high.

"I should have known you'd be set up to kill me when I rode over here, Mixler."

Mixler, gaunt from fury, had turned on Pecos. Vern Haltman got hold of his arm.

"Clay! Use your head."

HE SHOOK himself free. Instead of saying anything to Pecos, he turned back on Reavley. "All right, Rio. If you and your friends don't like the way things are going, you can get out."

"That suits us. We'll start cutting our stock in the morning."

"You'll not cut a steer. If you go, you'll go and leave your cattle behind. I'm not holding this herd up a day or an hour."

When they were gone, the Pecos Kid went back and picked up his coffee. It was half cold. He drained it, tossed away the grounds. He knew everyone was looking at him. Big Jim had moved over and was standing slightly at his left. Hernandez was somewhere in the shadow of the wagon.

Mixler hitched his pants up, a characteristic movement that showed the stud-horse power of his legs, and was about to speak, but there was a quiet movement at one side of the wagon and he saw that Lita Haltman was standing there, listening.

"You got something to say, Mixler?" the Kid asked in his quiet drawl. "If you have, let's get it settled now."

"I was thinking maybe you liked those quitters up there." He jerked his head, indicating the other camp. "If you do, maybe that's where you should be camping."

"Maybe it is. We'll be needing our wagon. You're hauling supplies in it, you know."

Andy Rasmussen, slouching over to the fire, swished the coffee back and forth to see if a cupful was left among the grounds. There was a smile on his long, loose face. He put the pot back and looked over at the Kid.

"I heard what you said to Reavley. What'd you mean—that I intended to shoot him in the back?"

"I heard someplace," Kid said softly, "that you'd picked up a notch or two that way. They told me that, down in Fort Addison."

Rasmussen was still leaning over. The cup was in his left hand. In straightening, his right hand suddenly swung up for the six-shooter that rode low in a holster on his thigh. He'd telegraphed it with his eyes, and Pecos, faster by a fifth of a second anyway, had him hopelessly beaten.

Pecos drew with a backward, dragging slap of his hand. He hesitated a fragment of time. Then the gun came to life lashing flame and lead across the fire.

He'd resisted the temptation to kill Rasmussen. Instead, he aimed at his wrist. With ten steps separating them, with Rasmussen strongly revealed by the fire, it was an easy shot.

The slug struck his forearm. Force of it turned him halfway around. He was still up, reeling and glassy eyed. He fell to his knees, grabbed his bullet-ripped arm, and stared at it as blood ran in swift streams from the tips of his fingers.

For a shocked second, nobody moved. Pecos stood straight, his gun drawn, the barrel elevated a trifle, a wisp of powder-smoke trailing from it.

"I'm not looking for trouble," he said in a clear voice. "All I want is to get to Deadwood with nine hundred steers. Maybe I'll do it, too. Me and my friends. If you had any idea of getting rid of me the way you got rid of Tom Mace, you better send somebody better'n Andy around to do it. And I'll give you warning right now. Next one, if I'm lucky enough to outdraw him, is going to need more'n a bonesetter. He's going to need a man with a shovel."

He laughed when he finished. He didn't seem to be particularly wary of anyone, but he didn't lose track of Mixler and Star Glynn. Those, he knew, were the dangerous ones, and for the moment, that danger had passed.

They wouldn't try anything—not tonight anyway.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Three Dead Men

THE following evening, Ed Ward and Kiowa Johnny rode in from the direction of Maverly and immediately had a private talk with Mixler.

Hernandez said, "Keed, those were the gunmen that followed Tom Mace?"

"Yeah. They were in Maverly. Wonder if they ever got a bullet in him. I'll lay gold against Jeff Davis paper that they didn't."

"Perhaps, but one thing is for certain, they will try to put bullets in *us*. One at a time, they will try to keel us. In the dark, in the back. They are afraid of you, now that you outdrew Rasmussen. We had better stay together, or we will not be three happy men riding to Deadwood. We will be three dead men riding nowhere."

There had been Indian smokes to the east and the northwest, so most of the next days were spent scouting for Sioux. They returned early one afternoon as the herd approached Windham Coulee.

Windham Coulee was a mighty gash, from one to four miles in width, sundering the country that sloped down from the Black Hills. Actually, it was not a single watercourse, but a network of them, diverging and joining, leaving hills with cutbank sides that rose flat-topped to the level of the high prairie.

Many years before, the fur traders had scratched out a cart trail to the bottom, but it had eroded, and streams, following its ruts, had cut new gullies, many to a depth of six feet.

Daddy Bearsign, getting there hours ahead of the herd, had drawn up and was spitting tobacco juice over the first cutbank pitch when Pecos and his companions rode up. In a minute Fred Jardine drove up in Reavley's wagon.

Jardine said, "McCrae'll never make it to the bottom. That wagon he's driving is just loose boards tied together with rawhide. And that Pittsburg of Jason's ain't much better. Why, that old Pittsburg came to the country durin' the Mexican War."

Ellis Haltman drove up in the supply wagon, and without stopping, started along the rims looking for a new course to the bottom. McCrae and Jason straggled along in their beat-up wagons half an hour later.

McCrae, without saying anything, sat hunched and dejected in the seat, looking into the coulee depths.

Pecos rode up beside him, and said, "Hello, Mack. How's your missis?"

He shook his head, saying, "Oh, tol'able," in a manner which showed she wasn't tolerable at all. "She's sick with what her sister had. The gall stones. Sometimes, along the gumbo patches, it's smooth enough to sleep, but it pains her to get jounced around." He motioned into the wild depths of the Windham. "She'll sure as hell get jounced down there."

"If I was you, I'd drive that woman back to Cheyenne," Daddy said. "They got a doc there, a Chinaman, and he treats them bowel stones with some sort of dried leaf he gets all the way from 'Frisco. I had a pal one time, he was camp cook when the U-P was building, and he had bowel stones so bad he was doubled with his knees higher than his ears and even whiskey wouldn't help him.

"Well, that Chink stewed up some of that green stuff that got him limbered and sound asleep and two days later he shucked them stones, a handful of 'em like the marbles you use playin' kelly pool, and he ain't had an attack since."

THE THIN face of Callie McCrae appeared in the opening of the Conestoga. She was probably no more than thirty-five, but she looked fifty. Seeing her,

Daddy Bearsign took off his filthy, dusty hat.

She said, "Who was this doctor?"

"Called himself Hung Gow, or something like that."

McCrae said with an angry defensiveness, "We can't go back there."

She was ready to cry. "Why can't we, Gayle? Why can't we turn around and go back to Cheyenne?"

"Because the wagon would never hold up. The wagon wouldn't get us back to the Platte."

She pointed at the coulee, "How long'll it last down there?"

He said doggedly, "We'll get through somehow if we stay with the herd. If our wagon gives out, we'll travel with Reavley. I'll get you to Miles. There'll be a doctor in Miles. Maybe a Chiny doctor, if that's what you need."

The Kid wondered if she'd live that long through the abuse of this foothills trail. It would be hell from here on, following this rough country. It still wasn't too late to turn west, reach the flat going past the headwaters of the Powder.

The herd, now on the graze, had topped a hump of the prairie a couple of miles away. Soon some riders came in sight and cut across toward the supply wagon. From half a mile distance, Pecos knew that one was Mixler, another Lita Haltman.

Mixler and one of the men dismounted and descended into the coulee. In a few mintues, Ellis Haltman rode part way to the main group of wagons and signaled them with his hat. When they arrived, they saw Mixler and Vern Haltman following a narrow bench along the steep coulee side about three hundred feet below.

Fred Jardine said, "They expect us to go down *there?* Holy hell, that's not track enough for a bighorn sheep."

From inside the sheets of McCrae's battered Conestoga came the sobbing voice of his wife. "Gayle, you know what he's trying to do. He's trying to wreck our wagons and kill us all. I told you at Brazos how it'd be. Them big outfits like Mixler and the Haltmans never had any interest in poor folk except to kill 'em off for their own profit."

Lita Haltman heard her and stood up in the stirrups to cry, "That's not true!"

"It's true, and you know it's true!"

"Callie!" McCrae said. "Let's not have any more of that. Lita's always been nice to you."

Mrs. McCrae started to cry. The Pecos Kid tried not to hear her. It made him feel sick and sweaty. He wanted to help her, but there was nothing he could do. Just *nothing.* This was Indian country. They couldn't turn back. They had to go on, across Windham, across other coulees as bad. If the wagon fell apart, they'd have to double up. If all the wagons fell apart, they'd have to ride, or walk, or crawl, or die.

Lita rode over and said, "Pecos, you're going to Deadwood?"

"That's my idea."

"Couldn't you take her along?"

"I don't know." Through Indian country, without roads, it would be impossible, but he couldn't bring himself to tell her it was impossible. "We'll have a look and see."

MIXLER, climbing the steep coulee, was watching them. Lita saw him, and her hands froze on the reins. Color had risen in her cheeks, beneath her natural pigment, beneath her tan. They were often together, she and Mixler, but up till then he'd thought it was his doing. Now he wasn't so sure. Lita was just a kid. Mixler was old enough to be her father. He had a wife in Texas, and a boy almost as old as Lita.

Hernandez jogged up, and sat slouched forward, a thoughtful smile on his lips. "You theenk perhaps?" He jerked his

head down the steep slope at Mixler. "You theenk she could care for heem, that man?"

"I'll kill him first!"

"Now señor, you speak like the Spaniard, like the son of the Don. I have sat watching you these many days. Each day eet come a little closer. Each day more plain that *one* day you will kill that man, or he will kill you."

The Kid knew it was true. He'd sensed it from the first hour. He'd been sure of it since the night he outdrew Rasmussen.

He heard Hernandez shout, "A snake! Is it a wager, señor?"

He turned in time to see Hernandez lean back and to one side unholstering his Colt. He fired, and a rattlesnake came twisting from a sage clump, throwing loops in his thick, scaly body.

The Kid drew a second later, and tried to cut the rattles, but the tail was in lashing movement, and his bullet pounded a geyser of dirt, missing by an inch. He fired again, but the rattles hung by a shred of skin, and it took a third shot to free them.

Hernandez was jubilant. "Slowly do I free myself of debt!" He had out his stub pencil and little black book. "Behold, now do I owe only the feefty thousand, four hundred dollars, and seex beets!"

Mixler wheeled his horse at sound of the shooting and rode toward them. He was stiff spined, with his powerful legs rammed hard in the stirrups. His eyes traveled to the snake which still had a twist of life left in him. He grabbed his gun, rammed it forward as though to add his own strength to the force of the bullet, and fired, blasting the snake in half. Ponderous as he seemed, the man was swift with a gun.

"What does that win for me?" he asked with a downward twist of his lips.

"No-theeng, for you did not wager."

Mixler rode back, poking the empty cartridge case from his gun. With it still in his hand he waved toward the coulee and shouted,

"All right, get a move." He called to Tommy Haltman with the supply wagon. "You go first. Lock the hind wheels. Skid to the first reef. We'll be down there to help you along."

THE WAGON was built low to the ground, with wide, solid wheels that made it a rough rider across the bunchgrass of the prairie, but added to its durability, giving it a low-slung center of gravity. It took the first steep pitch, its hind wheels snubbed with a hickory pole, then the pole was removed and it found a twisting, turning switchback from one rock reef level to the next to the final cutbank descent.

There, after some wrangling between Tommy and his elder brother, the team was unhitched, a post was set in a rock crevice, and the wagon was lowered, tailgate first, by means of doubled lariat ropes. The descent had taken half an hour, and the first steers were along the crests, bawling, sniffing the air for the smell of water.

"Get them wagons started down!" Mixler bellowed. "Get 'em started before that herd tramps out what road we got."

The cookwagon was next. More ungainly and topheavy, it clung precariously to the switchback. Then came the Haltman's wagon, and Reavley's, and Jason's.

Jason's wagon took the first descent in a cloud of dust and came to a stop with one of its front wheels sprung.

Jason got his team turned. Someone had removed the snubbing pole. He kept going along one of the switchback turns. His handbrake was useless. The pitch became steep, letting the wagon overrun his team. They lunged and ran with the wagon careening on its wobbly wheel, hanging to the edge of the reef. Still, it

might have escaped disaster, but for the crippled wheel. The wheel crumpled inward, and the wagon overturned. It struck on its side.

A rock projection stopped its descent momentarily. Jason had fallen free. He scrambled to his feet with the reins still in his hand. Supplies rolled from the rear of the wagon. A barrel of flour broke.

The horses were tangled and lunging to their feet. They'd have killed each other, but Gonzales, a little, dehydrated Haltman puncher, risked his life by cutting the tugs.

The wagon commenced sliding now that the tugs were gone. It turned over and over, smashing itself, and ended a demolished mass of rawhide and warped boards in the bottom.

McCrae had been following the Jason wagon. His face looked haggard, grayish under its tan. His wife was in the back, calling to him.

Pecos, riding along the steep side, came up at the rear of the wagon and saw her lying on her back with both arms across her face.

From below, he could hear Mixler shouting, "Well, get her out o' there and get that wagon moving. We don't want to be trapped in this coulee, eating the drag of the herd for two days. Damn you, McCrae, get that wagon to rolling, or we'll go and the hell with you."

Pecos tried to talk to her, but she stopped up her ears and kept wailing, "Leave me alone! Go and leave me alone! I don't care if I die. I'm not leaving this wagon."

PECOS called to Jim Swing, who dismounted, lowered the end gate, and leaning inside, lifted her out. He kept talking to her like he'd talk to a child as he carried her, half sliding, half walking, all the way to the bottom.

The Pecos Kid, preceding him, caught up with Tommy Haltman. "Get those supplies unloaded. We'll have to make a bed for her."

"Hold on! We can't unload this—"

"That's my wagon, and we're going to unload it. Some of this stuff can go in the cookwagon, and some in your own."

Mixler rode up as he was speaking. He stopped his horse, spat balled-up saliva and dirt, and said hoarsely, "I'm giving the orders here, Pecos, or have you forgotten?"

"If you're giving orders, tell young Haltman to unload the wagon or I'll kick that stuff out on the ground."

Mixler looked at him, and at Big Jim, who still held the woman. Lita, riding a wiry little gunpowder roan, was approaching at a gallop, and perhaps it was she who made him change his mind.

"All right, Tommy. Swap some of that cargo. Make room for her."

Men were carrying supplies downhill to lighten McCrae's wagon. Besides food, there were odds and ends of furniture, an old trunk filled with linens and fancywork. Lightened, and with men helping, it made the descent on its creaky wheels.

Steers were coming now, forty or fifty already at the bottom. Riders fought to turn the main body of the herd back so wagons could get going and not be trapped in the drag.

The bottoms broadened. There were groves of cottonwood. A spring-fed stream flowed from one of the feeder gullies, but already it had been turned to mud by the herd. The lead steers had stopped, and others were piling in on them, and the wagons went on alone to another spring, flowing clear and cold from an undercut strata of sandrock.

There, by working through the night, they got McCrae's wagon repaired. His wife returned to her flat pallet on the bottom. The wagon set out with the others at dawn, but the coulee bottom became a hell of rock and gullies, and in the afternoon one of the wheels buckled. It was

repaired somehow, rawhided, pegged. It gave out again on a steep pitch and the sagging shock took the opposite wheel with it. The wagon was hopeless. Some of the belongings were saved, loaded in with Jason's.

They kept going, hard pressed by the herd.

Returning at night with Jim Swing and Hernandez after a day of scouting for Indian sign, Pecos called McCrae to one side and said, "Your wife can't take it any more, Mack. I think you'd better head for Fort Lodgepole. Take our wagon and that big team of grays. You can make it in forty-eight hours."

"How about my cows? There's only four hundred of 'em, but they're all I got in the world."

"We'll cut 'em out with ours and drive to Deadwood. If you're lucky, it'll make you a fortune."

"Mixler'll never let you do it. *You* ain't driving to Deadwood. Nobody is. That Rocking A stock will go all the way to Montana whether you like it or not. Mixler won't let anybody split the herd now it's this far."

"Let us worry about that. You better head for Lodgepole."

"I want to think it over. I don't know what to do."

It was half a day's work finding a road over the side of the coulee. Beyond lay more rough country, well watered, deep in grass, but a teamster's nightmare. McCrae took one look at it and made up his mind.

"All right," he said to Pecos. "I'm ready to go."

Mixler shrugged when told of their decision. He gave the appearance of not caring one way or the other, but as he turned away, Pecos could see satisfaction in his manner. He'd driven off one of the small owners. Jason would be next. And then Reavley, or Carson, or even themselves.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sioux Country

JASON'S wife prepared them an early supper, and they set out, McCrae driving with an extra team tied to the end gate, and Pecos, Hernandez, and Big Jim ranging the country on the lookout for Sioux. They traveled all night, following the old travois trail to Big Muddy Springs. There, swapping horses, they headed across vast flats to the southwest.

In the afternoon they sighted a freight outfit, a string of twenty wagons creeping northward along the army road. The boss, a rough, red-headed man, offered McCrae the protection of his outfit as far as Tongue River Post. Fort Lodgepole, he said, had been abandoned in the face of Indian pressure.

Returning the next day, Pecos and his partners found the herd deep in the bottoms of Eaglerock Creek where Jason's wagon was in ruins and Reavley's a three-wheeled cripple.

After a night of work, hacking spokes from green cottonwood, Reavley hitched up and started out with the rest, but one of the wheels went out of line and collapsed inside half a mile. Jason, who had moved his outfit in with Reavley, sent his son Nubbins ahead to ask for help from the Haltmans.

Vern was driving the big wagon. He stopped and gave thought to the boy's request.

"We have an extra wheel forward in the cookwagon," he said, and was on the point of saying yes, but he saw Mixler coming on the gallop.

Mixler pulled his big gray horse to a stop amid a shower of dirt and addressed the boy roughly. "You looking for help on that broken down wagon? Well, go back and tell your dad and Reavley that they won't find it here."

When the boy, scared and almost ready

to cry, had turned and ridden off, Mixler said, "I don't know how many times I got to tell 'em these things."

Vern, fighting down an angry tremble, said, "It's either lend them a wheel or let them drop out."

"Then they drop out, and to hell with them. They been a stone around our necks ever since we crossed the Nations."

He'd have ridden away with that, but Vern stopped him. "Clay!"

"Yeah?"

"You know what they'll say about us if we show up with cattle and no owners. It looks like a poor way to start in business in a new territory."

"You're a tender-hearted fellow, Vern. You always had plenty of mercy on everybody. That's why you ended over your tail bone in debt and needed me to bail you out. Now, this herd's being run my way. I'll dump those Block H cattle of yours on the Deergrass. When I do that I'm through, and you'll be free to go broke the same way you did in Texas. *When we get to Deergrass,* that is. You're a good boy, Vern, so let's talk no more about it."

THE herd left Reavley, the Jasons, and Wolf Carson far behind. When Pecos and his companions came in at dark, they found them at work, cutting the broken wagon down to a cart. Two-thirds of the cargo was thrown away. Clouds had been slowly gathering all day, and it rained. The rain was fine and cold, slowly soaking all of them.

At noon they'd stopped to eat cold beef and dummy when Mixler and three of his men rode up.

He saw Anne Jason huddled under the cart with the smaller of her boys. The sight seemed to anger him.

"Jason, you better load that woman and kid in the cart and head for Fort Lodgepole."

Jason, beat out and wet to the skin, said, "You're orderin' me to leave the herd and—"

"The herd will get there. If you're not at Deergrass to claim it, I'll tally every hoof and make settlement. Get her in the cart and drive her to Lodgepole."

"It ain't even my cart. It belongs to Rio."

Rio Reavley shambled up. He was about to tangle with Mixler on the point, but he could tell by the tone of Jason's voice how desperately he wanted to leave. His eyes traveled to the woman, and he said, "All right. Take the cart. I'll shack up with Wolf. I'll look after your cows, Dave."

Pecos learned of their departure eighteen hours later when he returned with word that a Sioux war party had been following the herd, keeping watch of it from the flanks of the Black Hills.

After making the report to Mixler and the Haltmans, he went to Reavley's camp and said, "I hear Jason and his family set out for the Fort."

Reavley nodded. He was trying to boil coffee, but the sagebrush fuel was damp, and all he could get were great volumes of smoke. Standing by, watching him, were Geppert, Jardine, and Wolf Carson. They were a tired, ill-tempered crew.

Reavley said, "They took my wagon, what was left of it. We're down to packhorses."

"You shouldn't have let 'em. Not with war parties on the prowl."

"I guess maybe you don't like the way we're running our end of this outfit," Reavley said, getting to his feet.

"I'm not fighting with you. I'm on your side."

Reavley said, "Yeah." He looked into rainy darkness over west. "Damn it, I didn't want to see 'em go, but if you'd seen his old lady squattin' there under the cart—"

"Trail herd's no place for woman," Wolf Carson said.

"She'd have made it all right, and maybe Callie would have, too, if Mixler'd taken the main trail up through the forks of the Powder. He wanted to get rid of 'em, and he has. He's got rid of Tom Mace, he's got rid of McCrae, he's got rid of Jason. I reckon maybe he thinks I'm next. Or you, Pecos, so don't turn your back on Star Glynn or Kiowa Johnny."

"Ever think of cutting the herd and driving to Deadwood with us?"

"Ever think of having Star Glynn shoot you right in the guts?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I thought of it being the other way around."

"You got yourself a reputation, Pecos, and that I won't deny. But you'll be going up against something a lot tougher than Rasmussen when you tackle Glynn. Or Ed Ward. Mixler's got gunmen stacked pretty deep, and you'll have to climb through all of 'em before you cut that herd for Deadwood."

FROM the dark came Hernandez's voice, "Has señor seen the Keed shoot? Perhaps if señor would look in the leetle black book of Hernandez and see there the debt of feefty thousand dollar, lost by me to the Keed in shooting debts alone . . ."

Big Jim said, "I can't see what difference it makes to Mixler. What if we do drive to Deadwood? That way we won't be laying claim on any of that Montana grass he has such a hanker for."

"You don't understand. The Deergrass was just thrown open from the Blackfoot treaty reserve. This herd will do a nice job of grabbing it all. Big outfits like the Diamond Bar and the 69 won't get a foothold. Mixler and the Haltmans will be kings of the country, just like they were in Texas. What if a couple of us little ones do stick it out? They'll still be in a position to lord it over us.

"No, he's holding the herd together. He'll do it in spite of you. He'll do it in spite of hell. The man ain't human. He never quits. He won't quit on this. He'll take those Rocking A steers along, and you can take your choice whether he does it with you alive or with you dead."

The Kid laughed and took his hat off to shake water from the brim. "Why, now, I'd rather he'd do it with me alive. I sure would."

It cleared in the morning. The herd moved without dust. It was good to breathe and be alive. For the first time in days, Hernandez unwrapped his guitar from its slicker and sang. When the Pecos Kid rode up, he said, "Today we do not scout for the Sioux?"

"We're not far from the Belle Fourche." He pointed to a purplish valley in the remote distance, northwest. "Mixler'll never stop the herd. We'll have to start cutting our stuff now."

They worked easily all morning, cutting Rocking A steers from the bunch, drifting them to one side, bringing them in with the drag. In this manner, a third of Mace's herd had been bunched when Mixler learned of it and came at a gallop. With him were five men headed by Star Glynn.

Mixler brought his horse in with a mean twist of the bridle. Anger showed in the way he carried himself. He barked, "Who told you to start cutting the herd?"

Pecos answered, "If you'll notice, those are all Rocking A steers."

"If you want your cattle cut out, you're to come to me. Your job's scouting for Indians."

THE KID found a burr in his horse's mane and thoughtfully removed it. Without shifting his eyes, he could see Star Glynn edging to one side, his body low in the saddle, a hip-out position that brought the butt of his Colt within easy reach. Ed Ward had moved in the other direction, but unlike Star Glynn, so slack and casual, he stood in the stirrups and kept his elbows close against his body.

"Everything is up to me, Kid. I'm running the herd. I'll run it as I see fit!"

He wondered which of them was the fastest—Glynn, Ward, or big Clay Mixler. Glynn perhaps. He had that slack look, almost like Hernandez. Those were the ones to look out for. They made everything seem casual. They drew with shrugging, hitching movements, their guns exploding on the top of a hand-flip.

He'd heard that Glynn had killed eleven men. Maybe he'd killed twice times eleven. He wasn't the kind who talked about such things. He didn't file notches in those mother-of-pearl stocks on his .45's.

Pecos still picked at the cockleburr fragments. Hernandez and Jim Swing were riding up from the drag. He wondered if this would be the showdown. He wished Hernandez and Jim would stay

back. It was too good a chance for Mixler, getting them all at once, outgunned three to six.

The Kid tilted his head toward the blue summits of the mountains and drawled, "Them's the Black Hills, yonder. You recollect when we joined up we said they'd be the end of our trail."

"All right, make it the end of the trail. If you have a fancy for Deadwood, why don't you start out now?"

"Not without our cattle, seh."

Mixler was bent forward in his saddle, both hands on the pommel, a posture which accentuated the massive depth of his chest, the breadth of his shoulders. It placed his gun just back of his right hand.

"Not without your cattle? That's up to me. Everything's up to me. I'm running the herd. I'll run it as I see fit."

Hernandez heard him as he came to a stop. He cried, "You mean to take our cattle away from us and drive them to Montana? You mean you will fatten them on the Deergrass, and ship them by steamboat perhaps to St. Louis, and—"

"Butch!" Pecos cut him off. Hernandez would go too far. It was playing into Mixler's hands. The showdown would come, but it would have to come later. It would have to come at a time and place chosen not by Mixler, but by himself. He saw Glynn move his horse a trifle, and shifted to match it, keeping Mixler between them.

Mixler shouted to Hernandez, "Whatever you got on your mind, say it right out. This is as good a place to settle it as any."

Pecos said softly, "We just want our cows. Tom Mace wanted 'em taken through to Deadwood, and that's what we aim to do. That was the understanding. You never said it was unreasonable before."

"We're behind schedule. We should have crossed the Belle Fourche last week. I can't let you hold up the herd while you do your cutting."

The Kid laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "If that's the way it is, why, I guess that's the way it is." He lifted his hand in the Confederate cavalryman's salute. "We await your orders, seh."

"Keep track of those Indians. Those are my orders. *We'll* worry about getting your stock cut out."

CHAPTER NINE

Cut Your Own Damned Steers!

HERNANDEZ cursed steadily under his breath as they drifted toward the bench country. Finally he reined around and cried, "Was thees the Pecos Keed of old I heard, making wrinkles in his belly, bowing before that king of the gunman? Was thees the Pecos Keed that shot Querno and Alderdice, weeth two shots, bang-bang! in the hot dust of Guadalupe? Have you been eating so long the meat of the jackrabbit that your heart flutters like an old squaw at the thought of guns and powdersmoke? My cheeks burn with shame that I should steek my tail between my legs and follow you the wrong way from six men weeth notches in their guns."

Pecos said, "You like to be buried here?"

"I weel not be buried here, on thees prairie, even though he should throw three-times-six guns against me. Was it not told to me by a gypsy in Tres Castillos that I would die reech and respected, amid the broad acres of my hacienda, to the music of my weeping peons and grandchildren, both by the hundreds, in bed, with my boots off, with gold in my pocket and all my debts paid up? Then how could I do anything but shoot thees Gringo peeg before he could cock the hammer of his gun?"

"You're pretty good with that gun,

Butch. But while we were getting three of them, they'd have gotten three of us. That'd still leave them in the majority. But nothing happened, and we're alive. *Alive* is a pretty damned good way to be."

"You will then let heem take the herd? There is no fortune for us, waiting in Deadwood?"

"I didn't say that. It's just that we won't be able to do it alone. We'll need Reavley, and Carson, and all the men they can round up."

PECOS lay in his blankets. The herd was bedded down. Men on the night watch sang endlessly, riding the big circle. He could hear Jim snoring on one side of him. Hernandez lay silently on the other.

He said, "Butch, you awake?"

"*Si.* Awake thees long time thinking. We should not worry about cutting the Rocking A cattle, Keed. When the time comes, we will take our share, nine hundred or more, and drive toward Deadwood. Who cares for the brand? Is not a longhorn a longhorn? What could he prove once they were beefsteak in the bellies of twelve thousand miners?"

"I been thinking the same thing. We'll talk it over with Reavley."

Pecos nudged Big Jim and said, "Get up!"

"Mornin' already?" Jim muttered.

"We were going to see Reavley, remember?"

The horse wrangler was taking a nap with a blanket up over his head. He woke up when his remuda started runing in a circle and said, "Wait, damn it, before they bust that string corral down and run clear to the Black Hills." He saw who it was. "Oh, you boys taking a turn at night herd?"

Pecos said, "Injuns."

The wrangler looked scared and roped out the horses for them.

Reavley's camp was about two miles away. Only old Pancake Jeffers was there. He sat up with a heavy Sharps rifle in his hands. "Oh," he said, "it's you."

"Where's Rio?" Pecos asked.

"He ain't here." Pancake couldn't get over his suspicion of them because they stayed at Mixler's camp.

"I can see that. Where is he?"

"Well, I guess he's yonder in the dry wash, but if you go walking up on him after dark, you're asking for a .44 slug in the belly."

Hernandez said, "Perhaps we, too, should be sleeping in the dry wash."

Big Jim said, "*Now* who's making the jackrabbit talk?"

"Señor, you are talking to Hernandez Pedro Gonzales, son of the Fuente, son of the Flanagan. Among my ancestors weer the noblemen of the—"

The Kid said, "You're a shanty Irishman and a greaser, and you'd have been in your grave two years ago with that Medanos rope around your neck if I hadn't ridden twenty miles with the *caballeria.*"

"What is the point of thees?"

"The point is you're making too much noise, and one of these days I won't be able to save your neck."

Pecos raised his hand in a signal for the others to stay back. He rode alone to the edge of the dry wash. There he pulled up and called softly, "Rio!"

Reavley answered almost instantly, "Yeah! Who is it?"

"Pecos. Jim and Hernandez are with me."

"Oh." Pecos heard the double click of metal as he lowered the hammer of his gun. "All right, come down."

"You're a light sleeper."

"It pays a man sometimes."

Hernandez said, "You theenk that lobo, Mixler, would really try bushwhack?"

"I don't think one way or the other. I just don't take any chances I don't have to."

The Kid said, "You better come with us, Rio."

"Where you going?"

"Deadwood."

"Tonight?"

"No. Not tonight. We're supposed to turn at the Belle Fourche. We decided to make the break earlier. About four days from now, when we reach that big dry bottom they call the Ironrod."

Wolf Carson, sneaking down the dry wash with his rifle up, asked, "What's that you're saying?"

REAVLEY said, "The boys want us to string along with 'em to Deadwood." He stood, gangling and leather-tough, thinking about it. "Oh, hell. It'd take two-three days to cut our stuff out of the herd. Mixler'd never stand for it. He's got us too far outgunned."

"A steer's a steer."

"You mean just cut a chunk out of the herd and drive 'em? You might get into a heap of trouble trying to sell the other man's brand."

"Not in Deadwood. Anything goes in Deadwood."

While Reavley was thinking, Wolf Carson said, "Well, by grab, I'm in with you. I only got a handful of stock, but I'm in with you. I'd rather make one big gamble than live under the heel of that timberwolf for another thousand mile to Montana."

"All right." They were hard words for Reavley to say. He'd set his mind on getting a piece of the Deergrass, but the departure of Carson and Pecos would have left him alone at Mixler's mercy. "How do you plan to do it? Our cut will be about three thousand—"

"Thirty-six hundred. I promised McCrae."

"Thirty-six hundred then. Will we just cut them off the drag?"

"No, I'm not taking the drag. We got to have cattle willing to travel, because we'll have to run 'em all night through that Injun country. I noticed every morning that there's one bunch always hits out together. When the time comes, we'll cut them loose and run 'em up the bottoms. I haven't planned beyond that. No way of planning—we don't know what Mixler'll do."

Wolf Carson giggled and did a polka step in his patched-up boots. "Sweet name o' hell! That'll be just like twisting a grizzly's tail."

Reavley said, "He'll have us outgunned."

"And we'll have him by surprise. We might be half a day's travel off before he notices. Those cowboys eating dirt off the swing and the drag won't pay attention. The wagons will be four miles ahead. Star Glynn and his gunmen drift off somewhere every day and sleep in the shade till the cookwagon catches up with them. If we play it right, he won't get a fight organized until nightfall."

"And what then?"

"I know that country, yonder. So does Big Jim. There's a blind canyon back in the foothills where we'll be able to hold them off for a week. How many men can you round up?"

"Jardine and Pancake. Maybe Al Geppert. With us, that makes eight."

Big Jim muttered, "Eight against thirty!"

"They won't all of 'em be after us. This is Sioux country. Mixler won't take too big a chance on scattering the herd. Besides, there's a couple more I can pick up. Hank Wellens might go, and that horse wrangler. He's been having trouble with Mixler."

Hernandez said, "My countryman, Gonzales, already love me like a brother. Besides, I owe heem the sum of one hundred pesos, and how will he collect unless he come along to Deadwood?"

They talked details for an hour, and returned to their blankets. At grubpile in the morning, Pecos noticed Star Glynn

intently watching him. For just an instant it gave him a nervous, gutless feeling. It was almost as though he was a kid again, instead of twenty-eight with half a hundred gunfights under his belt. Only you never get over the fear of dying. And you never quite get over your fear of a man like Star Glynn.

He wondered, if the chips were down and they faced each other, which would win. He shrugged it off, wiped out his plate with a handful of grass, and tossed it in the plunder box. They'd never face each other that way. Not while Star had Ed Ward, Kiowa, and Billy Six-Spot at his back.

After grubpile, he rode with Big Jim up rising country. They turned with the sunrise warm on their backs to watch the herd.

"Where's Hernandez?" Pecos asked.

"Yonder," he tilted his head toward the hills. "He's singing those damned love songs again, making a lot of fool talk about how the women will follow him around Deadwood. He's going to get in trouble, Kid. He's going to get killed. That Deadwood's a tough town."

"So was Maverly a tough town. And Denver, and Cheyenne, and Dodge. Hernandez isn't buried in any of them towns."

"He would be if it hadn't been for us. Damn it all, maybe we're making a mistake. Maybe we ought to take these dogies right through to Deergrass. We'd be big ranchers up there, Pecos. We'd grow with the country."

Pecos had been thinking along those lines himself, but again he dismissed it from his mind. "It's no use, Jim. They're Mace's steers. Half of 'em. And Mace wanted 'em driven to Deadwood."

CHAPTER TEN

The Big Stampede

BIG JIM had always dreamed of owning a ranch of his own. That night, lying by the fire, he got out a battered volume entitled *How to Make One Hundred Thousand Dollars in the Cattle Business Out West,* and said, "Listen to what this book says, Butch. If you really want to pay off your debts, you'll do it a hell of a lot easier trailing to the Deergrass than to Deadwood, and this book proves it."

Hernandez was dreamy eyed, plucking his guitar. "In Deadwood you sell the steer for feefty, maybe one hundred dollars the head. In Deergrass for ten, maybe fifteen dollars the head. Your book says drive to Deergrass, then I say throw your book away, for it is a fool."

Big Jim cried, "Wait! The author takes care of that on page twelve. Quit playing that guitar and listen here."

While Big Jim was reading, the Kid stood, and moved back from the firelight.

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A candle was burning inside Haltman's Conestoga, and he could see the shadow movements of men against the cloth top. One was Mixler, another, Vern Haltman. There was a third shadow he imagined to be Ed Ward, but he couldn't be sure in silhouette.

Mixler was talking, he could tell that by the jerking movements of his head, emphasizing the words. They were having a big powwow. A man could hear easily through the canvas wagon sheets, he was thinking. It was a temptation, but he gave it up. They'd have sentries out. Rasmussen, Kiowa Johnny—either would like the chance to put a bullet or a knife in his back.

Big Jim was reading, squinting to make out the words by firelight, "...and beware the buyer who offers to buy stock for double or triple the market price, for he is most certainly a charlatan."

Hernandez, still softly strumming the guitar, said dreamily, "One time I knew a man from Charley Town. He was a stage driver. He was not so bad." A smile touched his lips. "He had a wife. She was not so bad, either. Oh, a little fat maybe, but what is wrong weeth that?"

The Kid, still watching the covered wagon, said, "How old was she?"

"So she was a little bit old. What is wrong weeth *that?*"

"Was she good looking?"

"No, she was not so good looking. She had big jowls, and there was a mole on the side of her mouth, and she dyed her hair red, I theenk, but what is wrong with that?" He put his guitar down. "Why should you laugh at thees poor old woman with her red face and her big nose? Weeth her husband gone, driving the stage for two-three days at a time and never home? You should come from Chihuahua and have respect for women. Besides, she made good apple pie."

"Oh, hell!" said Big Jim, and put the book back.

THE KID could no longer see Mixler's shadow. He'd moved away from the light. The camp was quieting down. There were the night sounds of cattle. A cowboy somewhere sang the interminable verses of "The Rabble Soldier."

Hernandez wrapped his guitar in the slicker, yawned, and said, "Time for sleeping, Keed. It will be a long tomorrow."

Pecos lay awake, looking at the stars. It had been dry the last few days, with a scent of smoke from forest fires in the Black Hills. The slight veil of smoke magnified the stars, making them appear to be suspended scarcely a pistol shot overhead. The night herder, to the slow rhythm of his horses' hoofs, was singing,

"I cry for rye whiskey
Wherever I roam,
I'm an old rabble soldier
And Dixie's my home."

Pecos had avoided Reavley all day. He didn't want to be seen talking to him. Mixler was no fool. He was wary as a wolf. He'd be quick to suspect. Now, with the camp asleep, he was tempted to hunt out Reavley's bed and talk to him. There were some details to be arranged.

He rolled to his side. The candle was no longer burning in Haltman's Conestoga. Through the wheels of the cookwagon he could see the dull glow of coals where the coffee sat, keeping hot for the night herders.

The cowboy's dreary chant, after coming close, had receded, but because he knew the words so well, he could still understand them.

"Oh bring me cold lager
And scrape off the foam,
I'm an old rabble soldier
And Dixie's my home."

He dozed and came suddenly awake. He restrained the impulse to get up. He

lay full length in his blankets. It had been a sound, a movement. He wasn't sure. Hernandez was sleeping, and farther off he could hear the regular snoring of Big Jim Swing.

He listened as minutes went by. Now, even the cowboy's singing had been engulfed by the vast prairie night. An ember in the fire popped and showered coals in the air. It was a slight thing, but after the long silence it hit him like a gunshot.

He sat up. His hand closed on the butt of his six-shooter. Then he saw movement, a shadow between him and the cook wagon, and he knew who it was. Lita Haltman.

He was clothed, aside from his boots. He pulled the boots on, strapped his gun around his waist. Then he spoke her name, and she came toward him.

"Pecos!"

"Yes."

She was frightened. As she came close, he could see the rapid rise and fall of her breast. Her lips were parted slightly. Her eyes kept searching the darkness around.

He said, "It's just Hernandez and Jim."

SHE reached, and he took hold of her arm. He was surprised how slim and small her hand was. A man forgets about women, living whole months and years in a rough land of men.

"Pecos," she whispered, "you can't stay any longer. You can't, Pecos. You have to get out. Tonight."

"You heard what Mix was cooking up at that meeting?"

"They found something out about you. Something you're going to do. I don't know what it was. You went somewhere last night, and Kiowa Johnny followed you. You went to see Reavley, I know that much."

Pecos cursed through his teeth. He should have known Mixler'd have the breed watching him, checking on him.

She said, "Pecos, they'll try to kill you!"

She stood very close, looking up at him. Her hands clutched the front of his shirt. He could smell her hair. It had a fresh wind and sage odor. He had an impression of her lithe body under the clothes she wore, and for a moment he forgot danger and everything, except that she was there.

"I have to go," she whispered.

He hadn't noticed—he had hold of her arms.

"Pecos," she whispered, "they mustn't find me here."

"*Who* find you here?"

"You know!"

She sounded as if she was going to cry. He thought she meant Mixler. She was afraid to have Mixler find them together because Mixler would be jealous. The thought made him go hot and cold.

His hands closed down on her arms, just below her shoulders. She twisted from side to side, but he didn't let her go.

He said, "You don't care anything for Mixler!" She didn't answer. He shook her back and forth, harder than he intended. Her hair came down and fell around her shoulders. "Answer me, you don't care anything about him! He's old enough to be your father. He has a wife back in Texas. He has a son as old as you, don't you know that?"

"Yes!" she whispered. "I don't care anything for him. I hate him! Do you hear, I hate him!"

He stopped. He felt ashamed. He let her go.

"I'm sorry."

"Why did you talk that way?"

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

He was thinking that if he went to Deadwood, it would mean leaving her behind. He didn't want to leave her with Mixler. Not even though three of her brothers were along.

She pulled away from him.

"Lita," he said, "wait a minute!"

"I can't stay," she whispered.

He noticed for the first time that she was barefooted. She ran with long steps, with the lithe grace of a prairie animal.

HE STOOD for several seconds after she was out of sight around the Haltman wagon. His own danger asserted itself again. It occurred to him that if Kiowa had been watching last night, he'd be watching again tonight. He'd have seen her. He'd carry the news straight to Mixler.

He walked to the shadow of the cook wagon. There he stopped, listened. No sound. Just the slight snapping of the fire, the thud of coffee in the big pot. He could see Haltman's wagon, with men sleeping under it. There was a tent beyond where Mixler slept. Farther off, horses moved restlessly in the night wrangler's rope corral. The herd was a mile off, bedded down on a grassy slope.

He heard the soft hoof-thud as a rider came up out of the darkness and dismounted by the fire. It was a young cowboy who went by the name of Pecos.

The cowboy poured a cup of coffee and was hunkered back on his heels blowing it when he noticed the Pecos Kid standing, watching him.

"Hello, Pecos," the Kid said.

After a start of surprise, the cowboy laughed. "Pecos yourself. Want a cup of coffee? It's thick and black as N'Orleans sorghum."

"Thanks."

He waited for the cowboy, brightly revealed by the glow of the fire, to pour one for him. The cowboy held the cup out. He had to step out from the wagon to take it.

The Pecos Kid knew the danger it would place him in. His fingers touched the butt of his Colt, making certain it rode in the right place. His eyes searched the darkness for the last time, but he didn't turn his head. He stepped forward, reaching for the cup, but at the final instant, as firelight struck him, he pivoted away.

The cup fell, struck the ground, and lashed hot liquid across his boots. Someone had moved from the shadow of an empty barrel that had been lifted down from Haltman's wagon.

A gun flashed. Explosion split the night stillness.

Pecos felt the whip of the bullet passing within inches of his shoulder. His own gun was in his hand. The pivot had ended in a crouch by the front wheel.

He fired twice, fast as he could thumb the hammer. Instinct told him the first shot connected.

He saw a man reel forward into the starlight, a tall man, limber legged, gun dangling in his hand. He stumbled and fell forward with his head bent under him. The man was Ed Ward.

Pecos started to get up, one hand gripping the wagon spokes. Then gunfire caught him from two directions.

The cowboy's horse, frightened, started away, dragging his bridle. The new burst of gunfire turned him. He galloped toward the cookwagon. The Pecos Kid rammed his gun away, and diving forward, got hold of the bridle.

BULLETS tore the sod under him. The horse sunfished and started to run. Pecos got hold of a stirrup. He was being dragged. His legs were under the horse's belly. Hoofs beats him across the thigh. For the space of two or three seconds all he could do was hold tight, then with a desperate effort he grabbed the horn, pulled himself to the saddle.

Fifty or sixty yards of darkness now separated him from the cookfire. They were still shooting, but none of the bullets were close.

He still had his Colt, and Pecos' carbine

Hernandez Flanagan

was in a saddle scabbard. He got the bronc stopped. He poked empty cartridge cases from the Colt, and reloaded from his belt.

Hernandez shouted his name. He answered through cupped hands. He sat with his gun poised, not knowing friend from enemy in the dark. Then the shooting diminished, and there was another sound, a rumble, like distant thunder, earth-shaking.

From far away came a cowboy's warning shout, "Stampede!"

The herd was in movement. By moonlight, he could see dust, a silvery cloud, and through it the shine of horns, the dark backs of cattle. They seemed to be in flux, like the sea.

Men forgot the fight. They were at the rope corrals, trying to catch their mounts. Content with a bridle or hackamore, they mounted bareback.

Now the thunder was growing. Baffled by echo and darkness, the herd was coming that way.

Pecos thought of the girl. He spurred toward the wagon. His horse veered from the fallen body of Ed Ward. He called, "Lita!" She answered him from off in the dark. She was riding at an angle from the herd.

"Keed!" It was Hernandez, with a gun still in his hand. He ran up, got hold of his stirrup. His teeth flashed white against his dark skin. "They are coming, Keed! Perhaps they weel run all the way to Deadwood, no?"

"Where's Jim?" Then he saw the big fellow running up with a warsack under one arm, a Winchester, Colt, and cartridge belt under the other.

"What a hell of a night to start a ruckus," he said. His highpitched, accusing voice sounded out of place against the rising thunder of the herd. "We got to get out of here, Kid. We got to ride that horse double."

Hernandez jeered, "Triple we weell ride heem! What do you theenk he is, one horse or an elephant?"

It could now be seen that the main body of the herd was swinging slightly to the northeast, but still the later wash of it would most certainly engulf the camp. From down the knoll riders were on the gallop, firing, trying to mill the leaders.

Hernandez was down behind a wagon wheel, gun poised. "Ride and save yourself, Keed!" he said over his shoulder.

"The hell with you. We have a quarter minute. Get the saddles over here."

PECOS tied the bronc to the wagon, waited with his gun drawn. Big Jim was beside him.

"You think they'll turn 'em?" Jim asked.

"We won't turn 'em, but we might split 'em if they don't stack up too deep."

They waited a quarter minute as the herd roared ever closer. A portion had split off, and gone past to the east. Its dust rolled in a thick blanket making it hard to breathe. They saw the first steers veering off from the wagons. Then others closed in, a dense, wall-eyed, terrified mass.

The Kid picked a steer and fired. It went down, digging its head, with its hind quarters rolling high. He heard the crash of guns on both sides of him. There were cattle down and cattle piling over them, plunging, getting up again.

Two steers came on, directly toward the wagon. One was shot and fell only a dozen yards away, the other ran straight on and crashed the wagon box.

Bawling, the animal got to its feet, ran, and was carried away by the mass flowing to the south.

No longer able to see the herd, they fired blindly. The flames of their guns looked ruddy through air too thick to breathe. And suddenly there was nothing left. Only the bawl of crippled cattle, the settling layers of dust, the guns hot in their hands.

"We are still here," said Hernandez. "We still live, we still breathe. Did I not say I would die reech and respected in the midst of my acres and my grandchildren in Chihuahua?"

The Kid said, "Wait here. I'll ride and see if I can find the remuda. Think they headed southeast."

He galloped the bronc, digging dirt from his eyes and nostrils. Somehow he'd been cut across both lips. He had no memory of anything striking him. Dust clouds were clearing now, and he could see.

The cattle were far away and still running. They'd split into sections. After a mile, he saw two riders—Wolf Carson and Geppert.

"Where's Rio?" he asked.

"Yonder." Wolf jerked his head toward the up-country. "You want us to bring him?"

"Tell him one end of that herd took out in the direction of Deadwood. It'll be our last chance. We better keep 'em going."

The remuda had been scattered, but it hadn't run far. He gathered a dozen horses and herded them back. Hernandez plodded up from the darkness, moaning.

"My guitar, my guitar, it is gone. Why did I not bring it weeth me instead of thees old apple-horn saddle? Why did I leave it, my sweetheart, to die under the hoofs of that herd?"

"We'll buy one in Deadwood. Rope yourself a horse. I don't know how long I can hold 'em."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sitting Bull's Land

EASTWARD they found cattle scattered for miles. All fear run out of them, they were grazing in jack timber and brush-filled draws. They gathered them in bunches of forty or fifty and kept crowding them in to a big dry wash that

slanted back toward the hills. After a couple of hours, they met Rio Reavley and his men working ridges up from the south.

Brought together, Pecos made a rough tally. "Thirty-one hundred," he said. "If we get twenty-five hundred of them to Deadwood, I won't complain."

With Reavley and Carson were Pancake, Al Geppert, and Fred Jardine. That made a total of eight. Gonzales and the wrangler would probably come, but there was scant chance of finding them. They drove on with what men and horses they had, up miles of dry wash, as the sides steepened and jackpine commenced to lay black blankets over the hillsides.

The dry wash forked, and forked again as it cut into the steeper hills. They drove the herd across slide-rock and knee-high bramble to a bench terrace, running for miles north and south, fronting the first great ridge of the Black Hills.

Dawn, in streaks of pink and yellow, silhouetted the summits. Dust still hovered in a fine cloud below, dust that first looked like gray fog and then turned the color of corn meal as the sun struck it.

"See them?" Hernandez asked, coming to a stop beside Pecos.

"The herd? Yes, it's 'way yonder. No, *'way* over. We come farther than we thought. Either that or the main bunch made a half-circle and run over west. Must be ten miles off."

After long watching, they could tell that cowboys were at work, gathering the herd. It would be a big job. Mixler would have the tough choice of letting this thirty-one hundred go to Deadwood, or letting the main herd graze and scatter, and probably end up in one of Sitting Bull's stew-pots.

"Better get moving," Pecos said.

The drive went on all day, along the bench, across a vast mountain shoulder, and finally down through rock and pine to the depths of Ironrod Coulee.

A stream flowed in the bottom, clear and cold. In its deep riffles, one could see the darting, grayish shapes of fingerling trout. It was mining country, prospected before Sitting Bull left the Agency, and placer pits had been sunk here and there in the bench gravel.

"We'll camp now," Pecos said.

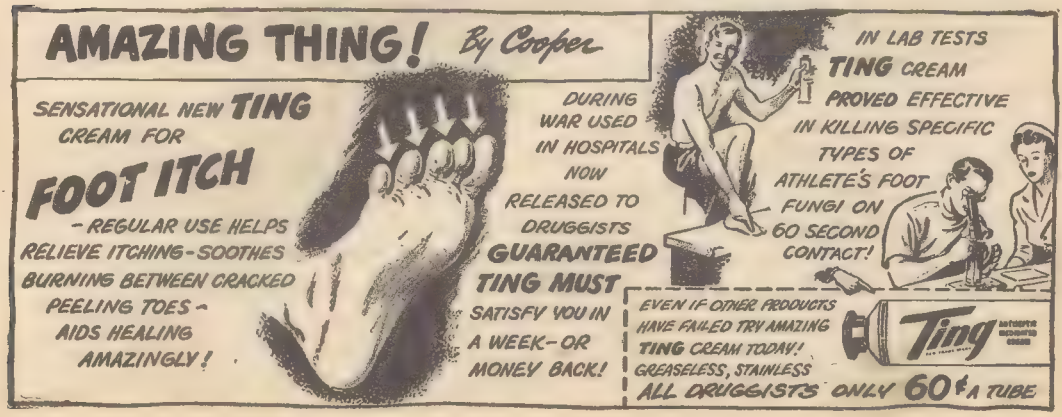
Darkness settled more rapidly here than on the plains. They risked building a little fire, and put it out as soon as they'd finished making coffee and doughgod.

THE HERD spread out, grazing through the lush grass. High in the rocks a coyote howled.

Rio stood up, and in the darkness they could hear him fooling with his Winchester.

"There'll be trouble tonight," he said.

"I doubt it." Pecos sounded sleepy. He lay on his back with clasped hands under his head, looking at the stars. "He'll wait,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Mixler will. He don't go around just shooting off powder for the hell of it. He'll see where we're going, then he'll go ahead and lay a nice, cross-fire ambush, by *good strong daylight* so's those gunmen can get us in the fine notch of their sights."

"Just the same, I'm watching the rocks."

"Sure. We'll split the night in half. That all right?"

Reavley awakened him about midnight. Pecos sat up, got his boots on, and stamped life into the cold leather. Hernandez, hearing him, also got up, but Big Jim still snored.

"See anything?" Pecos asked.

Reavley gestured, but it was vague in the dark. "Yes. There was somebody yonder. Came sneaking along. I followed. Tried to get a look at him, but that timber is blacker'n a suit of spades."

"Injun?"

"It was a white man. He doubled back, and I saw him a quarter-mile off, getting on his horse. He didn't get on the off-side like an Injun. I had a hunch it was Evas Williams."

Hernandez asked, "Should I wake Beeg Jeem?"

Pecos said, "Let him sleep. He ate the drag on this herd all day. He earned it."

The night was quiet. Pecos and Hernandez scouted opposite rims of the valley, saw nothing. The camp was already awake when they came down through the gray light of dawn.

Cattle were balky, and it took hours of hard riding to get them in steady movement, across meadow, through brush, through rocky narrows.

Night had left a chill in the valley, then suddenly a bright sun drove it away and the morning was hot. Sunlight reflected from cliffs and talus rock. Pecos' shirt was wet. It stuck to his back. Riding, shouting, swinging the rope goad had made him forget the danger of ambush. He remembered it now, and turned his horse up a deer trail that zig-zagged through rock and timber to the north rim.

High above the valley floor, he stopped to let his horse breathe. The air was clear and dry, filled with the slightly burned odor of summer-dry pine. Mountain summits covered with forest rose to the east. At one place he could see a switchback trail terminating at a series of chalky-looking scars. Those were dumps extending downhill from the mouths of tunnels where some wandering prospector had taken his chance on Indians while exploring the outcrop of a gold quartz vein.

A rider slowly climbed the far side. It was too far to tell for sure, but Pecos decided it was Hernandez.

Pecos kept riding, following a contour of the mountain. Hernandez had disappeared in a rocky draw. Pecos saw him again much later, miles farther, approaching another summit.

PECOS dismounted and hunkered in the cover of trees. By slow degrees, his eyes swept the vast country beneath him. From a distance, when the wind was right, he could hear the bawling of cattle. At other times there were only the cries of veering eagles, the vast sigh of wind currents through evergreens.

He was hungry. He closed his eyes to rest them. He dozed for a few seconds, and on opening his eyes glimpsed movement far across the valley.

A man was on foot, tiny from distance, climbing.

It wasn't Hernandez. Hernandez had long before reached a higher level. Then he glimpsed a second man, perhaps a quarter mile to the west, just disappearing in timber.

He waited, but he didn't reappear. Now the first man was gone from sight, too. Suddenly he realized that Hernandez was coming from above, horseback, following a twisting trail where talus rock sloped

from the face of a cliff, and the men were below, under cover, waiting for him.

He cupped his hands and shouted. Hernandez did not look up. He shouted again and again, but Hernandez remained bent forward in his saddle, eyes on the treacherous descent.

Pecos drew his six-shooter, and moving to a reflecting surface of rock, he fired.

Hernandez still rode as the echoes pounded away. Then, after what seemed to be a long wait, he jerked erect and looked. It had taken that long for the sound to reach him.

Pecos whipped off his shirt and started to signal with it. A second later, Hernandez twisted from the saddle, drawing his Winchester as he went, and dropped to all fours.

He fired. A spurt of gunsmoke appeared, hung suspended on the air. Instantly there were gunsmokes down the mountainside. Then the *crack-crack* of rifle fire came to him. It was furious for a while, then it tapered off with groups of shots separated by intervals of silence.

Hernandez was on his stomach, working his way from one rock cover to the next. Pecos could see him, though he was hidden from his attackers down the slope.

Pecos mounted and picked his way downhill. In timber, he had only brief glimpses of the battle across from him. He could no longer tell where Hernandez was, though the brittle cracking of gunfire still came, each shot multiplied by echoes that chased it like rapid handclaps.

He was nearing the bottom. A bullet stung the rocks five or six feet to his right and whined off with a vicious discord.

He should have expected it, but it had come as a surprise. His movement was pure reflex. He spurred, doubled over, his body behind the horse, his rifle in his hands, as more bullets whined around him.

Jackpine ripped at him, hid him from view. He dismounted. There was a rock reef now separating him from his attackers. He clambered on hands and feet, reached the sharp-broken crest, fell face down in needle-sharp juniper.

He found himself looking down on a tiny feeder gulch. A haze of gunsmoke had ascended and drifted languidly on the hot air. There was movement below and to the right. A man was crawling on all fours. Pecos aimed and fired with one movement, and saw the grayish shower of dirt as his bullet tore under him. He took coarser sight, fired again, again, fast as his hand could operate the lever of the rifle.

OTHER guns opened up. Bullets were coming from two directions. He'd stumbled on the main ambush.

He slid boots first back down the reef, found his horse, rode around the slope staying in timber, and came out with a view of the bottoms.

The herd was half a mile away. Only the lead steers were in view. Jardine and Reavley had stopped them. Reavley heard the crash and clatter of Pecos' descent and started to lift his gun.

"Me! Pecos!"

Reavley waited, watching, and made sure. Then he started up the valley at a gallop.

A gun exploded from high among the rocks. Reavley was hit. The bullet went through him and pounded gray dust from the earth beyond. Reavley stayed with his horse for a second, and sprawled face up on the ground.

The ambusher fired again, aiming at Jardine. Jardine had whirled his horse around. The horse reared, and that saved him.

Pecos, on a low shoulder of bank, turned and saw the man hunkered, leveling a third cartridge into his rifle. Even at two hundred and fifty yards he could tell who it was. Star Glynn.

Pecos had no time to aim. He took a snap-shot, and the bullet, showering

Star Glynn with dirt, made him miss Jardine.

Pecos cursed through his teeth. Firing uphill, he'd made the most elementary of mistakes and shot to low. He fired again, but Glynn was already lunging on his side to the cover of some fallen timber nearby.

Pecos turned, rode on a slanting course uphill, through timber. When steepness made the horse lose footing, he sprang off and climbed. He stopped with his lungs splitting for air. For a second he was dizzy. He lay with one cheek pressed against a sun-hot piece of slide rock while he got his breath.

Then he sat up and recovered his bearings.

He could see the heap of logs where Glynn had placed himself, but now he was gone.

The herd was all under his gaze. Lead steers, frightened by gunfire, had turned back. Meeting the press of the herd, they were jam-packed and milling, horns tossed high.

Reavley hadn't moved. He lay face down. The sun raised a metallic gleam from the receiver of his rifle, which had fallen in low buckbush.

Big Jim was riding on the far side of the herd, squeezed against the canyon wall. Pecos shouted to him. Bawling of the herd covered his voice. Back on the drag was Pancake and Al Geppert. He couldn't see Wolf Carson.

He heard his name called, looked across, saw Hernandez riding downhill. *All clear,* Hernandez was signaling to him.

Pecos met him in the bottom. "They bushwhacked Reavley, did you happen to notice that?"

"I notice," Hernandez whispered through his teeth. "It was Star Glynn. Someday I theenk I will kill heem. You hear? That is a promise. Someday I will kill heem."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Wildfire!

THEY buried Reavley in a shallow grave and heaped rocks over it. Then they went on, along an ever steepening valley. At night they pocketed the herd and gathered, a lean-faced silent group, around a tiny cookfire hidden between the steep banks of a gully. They drank coffee, and gnawed jerked beef that was tough as the sole of a moccasin.

"Last of the jerky," Pancake said. "We'll have doughgod tomorrow. I don't know what'n hell we'll do after that."

"Plenty of beef," Jim said in his treble. "And you won't be able to tell *that* beef from jerky, either, if we run 'em much farther. I hope them Deadwood miners haven't got their mouths set for a rare tender steak, because they'll need teeth like a winter wolf to chaw these critters."

Pecos said, "After eating packrat for the last year, they won't complain if their beef's got a little substance to it. Those miners will sit down to our steaks and think they come from Delmonico's back in Noo Yawk."

Geppert said, "If we get 'em there."

"We'll get 'em there."

There was no alarm during the night, none the next day. Hernandez, scouting for trail, rode far ahead and returned at sundown with word that they would soon reach some elevated parklands, and after a few miles of those, could cross a rocky escarpment and drop down on the headwaters of the Spearfish. This in turn would take them north to the Redwater, and following that south again, they would reach Deadwood.

Pecos asked, "How long will it take us?"

"To the Spearfish? I theenk two days. Maybe we run these cow like hell we make it tomorrow."

"Then let's run 'em like hell."

Pecos, Carson, and Big Jim took the early watch. They returned about midnight, and Geppert, Hernandez, and Jardine took over. Old Pancake, who was stove up from rheumatism, cared for the remuda.

It seemed to Pecos he'd barely crawled in his blankets when he awoke with the raw feel of smoke in his throat.

The stars were hazy. As he stood, he heard the crash of running feet. Hernandez shouted, "Fire! Forest fire. She's ahead, running thees way. Where the hell? I can see notheeng! Where are you?"

Pecos answered him. The camp was up. Horses for morning were on picket ropes, saddled, ready. In a matter of seconds, every man was mounted.

Geppert and Jardine quickly followed Hernandez into camp.

Pancake said, "We better get the hobbles off these broncs. If that herd starts to move, they'll tromp 'em to mincemeat."

Pecos said, "Men, grab yourselves an extra horse. Get him on a lead string before they drift back to Texas."

The herd was up, bawling, milling around. The stars, visible only a minute before, had been covered by blowing layers of smoke. It made a dense, thick darkness. A man could scarcely see the ears of the horse he was riding.

Geppert shouted, "I got my horse fixed to lead. What in hell are we waiting for?"

"Hold on!" Pecos stopped them a second. "We'll head down-valley. We'll stop at the forks. If the herd runs, we'll try to mill 'em there. These fires run in streaks. If it goes down the main channel, we'll head up the south gulch."

THEY rode, trusting the instincts of their horses, down the valley. Smoke, ever more dense, made a man's eyes water, his lungs raw. A horse stumbled and fell. Pecos could hear Hernandez cursing in Spanish.

He stopped. "You all right, Butch?"

"My horse is lame."

"Can he travel?"

"We will see."

The others were ahead of them. Pecos waited for ten seconds that seemed like a minute. He could see the fire, a brownish red line, through smoke and flame that slanted down the mountainside. It ran before the wind, was carried by heat-draught into the narrow V of the canyon.

He drew his silk kerchief, rode until his horse splashed the creek, and bent over, dipped it, squeezed it out, and breathed through it.

"Keed?" Hernandez said.

"Here I am."

Hernandez was bareback on his spare horse. They rode on, a steady trot and gallop, taking their chances among rocks, windfalls, and prospect holes.

The wind seemed stronger now. It blew smoke in dense layers with once in a

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while a current of clear air that was refreshing as spring water on the desert.

The canyon turned, and turned again. Suddenly they crashed deep in brush, and for a moment Pecos had no idea where they were.

"Pecos!" he heard Jim Swing shout from the gloom ahead of them.

He answered and rode, bent low over his horse, clawing brush out of his way. They descended steeply and climbed steeply. It was a dry feeder stream.

Underfoot was grassy earth. The canyon walls seemed to be nowhere close. He was baffled, turned around. Even the breeze seemed to have changed. He called Jim's name again, heard the answer from an unexpected direction, rode toward it.

Now he could see a little. Jim and the others were there, waiting.

Jim said, "I thought something'd happened to you. Where's Butch?"

"I am here, bareback, leading a lame horse. Where are *you?* Where are all of us?"

"This is the canyon forks."

Now that they'd stopped, Pecos could hear bawling as the herd moved behind them.

Wolf Carson said, "There won't be much left to deliver in Deadwood after they run through this hell-hole."

Pecos said, "They're not running hard."

The canyon would contain them, rough ground keep some of the animals moving against the current. You need plenty of room for a real stampede.

"Think we can turn 'em here?"

"We might if the smoke cleared a little."

THEY rode slowly across the bottoms. A cross-current of wind flowed down the gulch from the southeast, carrying smoke away. Here there was only a thin fog. They could see a rocky horizon on the south; down-canyon the smoke lay in drifts against the north wall and veiled some narrows where rock walls closed in.

Jardine said, "We'll have to keep 'em here or they'll run to kingdom-come."

Now they were close to the narrows. Jardine, who was in the lead, unexpectedly wheeled his horse and shouted. Gunfire spurted from two directions, and bullet shock cut the sound in his throat.

The slug knocked him sidewise from his horse. He fell, but the fall ended in a scramble toward cover, so Pecos, who was behind, knew there was life left in him.

Pecos spurred straight forward, bent, and tried to lift the man up beside him. Jardine, while tall and slim, was heavier than Pecos expected.

They were caught in a crossfire. A slug tore between the horse's legs, cut a furrow under Jardine's lifted shoulders. Pecos felt the sting of pellets, the wind-whip of lead. His horse lunged in a circle. Pecos clung to Jardine, and Jardine to him. Then Jardine, shaking off bullet shock, made a wild grab, got the cantle, and dragged himself up till he lay behind the saddle.

It had taken about three seconds. The interval seemed timeless, something plucked out of space when a thousand thoughts exploded through a man's brain. Pecos expected the shock of a bullet, the blackness, with a ringing in his ears, but an instant later he was as certain that no bullet *could* touch him. He felt proof against them. He could have ridden through ten thousand hails of lead with none of them touching him.

He carried with him a memory of their voices. Mixler's voice, Ellis Haltman's voice. He hadn't expected the Haltmans to take part in a bushwhack. But Ellis was a hothead . . .

Hernandez, in the black haze somewhere, called his name.

"Get to going!" Pecos shouted back. He had a hard time getting his voice up

with the raw smoke in his throat. "Get to going before the herd traps you."

Mixler had been waiting for that. He'd expected to cut all of them down at the narrows with pressure from the herd giving them no chance for escape. Only the herd, blinded and baffled, had moved too slowly.

He kept riding. He still had the spare horse on a lead string. The steep rocks of the canyon stopped them. He turned and followed a contour. He found what seemed to be a trail. It soon petered out, but the horse kept climbing despite slide rock that gave way underfoot, despite the double load on his back.

"Can you ride?" Pecos asked.

"I think so." Jardine grunted from the effort of speaking. "You take that other bronc. But tie my feet down. One whole side of me feels dead."

"Where you hit?"

"Chest. High up someplace."

PECOS dismounted, tied Jardine's boots in the stirrups which he snubbed tight. Then, riding bareback with a rope hackamore, he went on, hunting a steep trail, climbing, always climbing.

He heard hoofs somewhere back of him on the smoke-shrouded slope and thought without good reason that it was Hernandez.

"Butch?" he called.

There was a hesitation, then a voice, "Yes, Keed?"

It wasn't Hernandez. It was Kiowa Johnny, trying to sound like him. That sneaking, killing halfbreed, Kiowa Johnny.

There'd be others with him. He had to keep going, find safety, a place where he could get Jardine down and bandage him.

After long climbing, he heard Jardine say, "I'm bleeding, Pecos. You got to let me down."

He stopped. There was no moon nor stars, but he was able to really see Jardine for the first time.

He realized that it was dawn.

Jardine was slumped forward, his left arm cramped around the saddlehorn, fingers anchored to his belt. His right hand was pressed high on his shoulder trying to stop the wound. He'd been hit just under the collarbone. The bullet had gone through, been turned by his shoulder-

Clay Mixler

blade, and traveled down. Pecos could feel the hard lump of it just beneath the skin.

Jardine whispered, "What you—think—Kid?"

"It missed the lung. Get you plugged up, you'll be all right. You can't ride much farther, though. We got to stop pretty soon."

"They're coming, Kid."

"Then we'll fight 'em off."

"To hell—with that. Leave me here. No use—both of us—getting it."

He couldn't leave him there, in the timber. For now, the fire seemed to have made its run below, missing the canyon side, but a shift of wind would bring it back and trap them.

The mountainside seemed gray and endless. At last he found a steep gulch and followed it until he found moss that felt cool through the sides of his boots. Timber grew in isolated clumps, but barring the chance of high wind, no fire would spread to them. It was the best he could hope for.

He carried Jardine down, found a hiding place among fallen trunks, fixed him a bed, bandaged him, washed his face with damp moss.

"How you feel?" he asked.

Jardine managed to smile. "I feel good. I just want to lie here. I just want to sleep."

"I'll come back. Listen to me—I don't know how long it'll be, but I'll be back."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ambushed!

HE SWAPPED saddles, turned the other horse free. He stood, elbows on the saddle, letting fatigue run out of his body. Above and below lay the vast mountainside. Blending with the gray curtain, it seemed endless. The smoke was dense. He could see less than fifty yards in any direction. Then an eddy brought a long vista into view.

Far downhill, trees rose beyond a rock slide, a knob of stone beyond the trees, and he had an impression of more trees beyond.

A bullet stirred rocks with a hard rattle near his feet, the sound of explosion closely after it.

Instinctively he went down. His horse, lunging with head up, almost broke away. Holding tight, with the bridle twisted around his left wrist, he let the horse drag him. On one knee, he reached and whipped the carbine from its saddle scabbard.

He didn't fire. Drifting smoke closed in. A second bullet buzzed the air past his cheek. The report was from farther off, from farther to the east.

They'd seen him. They were converging on him.

Jardine called, and he answered, "I'm all right. Now keep quiet. I'm leaving, and I'll take them with me."

Leading the horse, he climbed slowly. After sixty or seventy yards he stopped, waited for the smoke to clear a little. A bullet, singing close, told him he'd been seen. He kept going, taking them at a wide angle away from the wounded man, and stopped at the ridge summit. A cliff dropped off ahead of him.

He followed along its rim for about two hundred yards, and reached a spot where it had been cut by a landslide.

It was a seventy-degree slope, but he had no choice. They were closing in from two directions.

He dismounted and started down. The horse tried to balk, but Pecos' heavy hand on the bridle brought him along. They slid through rock and dirt and came to a stop above a talus slope.

The talus rock, huge and angular, was almost impassable. What seemed to be a deer trail doubled back along the mountain. He mounted and followed it.

It ran along the base of the cliff with a field of giant boulders below. The horse couldn't turn back, so Pecos let the reins hang over the saddlehorn and with his rifle out, kept watch of the cliff rim high overhead.

A horseman appeared, was silhouetted against the smoke-gray sky. He saw Pecos and brought his rifle around to fire, but Pecos took a snapshot with the gunstock cradled in the bend of his arm.

The bullet flew a trifle to the right, missed the rider, but scorched the horse. The horse reared. On sloping rock, his legs went from under him. The rider fired wildly. He dropped his rifle and made a grab for leather.

The horse dumped him, lunged to his

feet, trampled over him, galloped out of sight.

The man slipped across the edge of the precipice. He screamed from terror, and for the first time Pecos realized it was Kiowa Johnny.

KIOWA hung for a second, caught by a rock projection. Then he fell with a shower of stones chasing him. He struck on his back with his arms wide. His broken body was wedged between rocks only an arm's reach from the trail. The bronc, frightened, refused to pass, and Pecos had to dismount, make a blindfold, and lead him.

There were more men above, but Pecos was now hidden by the slightly overhanging face of the cliff.

The trail narrowed. Now it was cliff above and below. He walked with one hand against the rock wall, the other holding the bridle. There was scarcely room for one foot ahead of the other. He didn't look below. He set his mind not to think where one misstep would plummet him.

There was another landslide channel. It placed him briefly in view, and a bullet from long range stirred a geyser of dirt twenty feet below him. He didn't bother to look around. He kept going, on and on, a twisting, slow descent.

He mounted again, rode through wind-twisted dwarf pine. Below, through smoke, he could see the valley bottom with here and there the metallic shine of a stream.

He traveled for many minutes. There was no more gunfire, no sign of pursuit. Nearing the base of the steep slope, he saw horsemen below at his right. They'd found a shorter route. They were closing in.

He had little time for decision. He turned sharply, and spurring his horse, tried to escape by a trail through timber.

From above, he'd been unable to appraise the rough topography. Now he saw that his course was suicidal. It would take him to a steep switchback, and the switchback would lead him to the bottom directly into their guns.

He slowed his horse. Below, he had seen the roof of a shanty. Closer, near the foot of the slope, lay a rusty heap of dirt. That was a prospecting dump, and its size told him that a tunnel of considerable depth must have been driven into the mountainside.

It occurred to him that there'd be an air shaft somewhere close. He reined in. Finally saw it. The air shaft was unmarked by a dump. It had been driven from below in the nature of a raise. Only a cribwork of logs around the collar showed it was there.

He quickly dismounted, looked into its black depths. A steady upcast of air told him it communicated with the tunnel. No ladder, but pole cribbing and X-pieces had been set to hold the walls. He'd be able to scale it from below without any trouble.

Working swiftly, he dragged deadwood branches to conceal the opening. Then, running back to his horse, he mounted and rode down the switchback to the valley bottom.

A rifle bullet whipped past with a sting of closeness. He saw men and fired back rapidly as he could lever his Winchester. His bullets drove them to cover. They were beyond the cabin, among rocks, content to keep him cornered until help arrived.

Pecos found cover close against the hillside. The mine dump, a flat projection terminating in a pole tipple, gave more concealment. The horse balked at the dark entrance. He blindfolded him, led him inside.

There, in the cool dampness, he sat down with his rifle across his knees, knowing he'd be able to fight back ten men or a hundred.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Death Slide

HE WAS tired. His legs felt paralyzed. He dozed between waking and sleeping, and a sound brought him up, alert.

Someone had spoken. For an instant he imagined the voice came from the mine depths behind him. Then he realized it was only an echo.

"Pecos!" the voice repeated. It was Mixler.

He didn't answer. He rolled a cigarette, and dry-smoked it. A stone rattled near the portal. Then Mixler again, closer now.

"Pecos! Pecos, can you hear me?"

He didn't answer. The voice kept ringing for a long time in the dark rock walls of the tunnel. It reminded him of Hernandez's guitar, and how, lying close to it in the still, prairie night, one could hear the tiny, ringing sound that always hung to the strings. The mine was like that, if one listened closely enough.

A gunshot deafened him. He had to stand to restrain the horse. Someone had fired upward, into the portal. A sulphurous smell drifted toward him.

"Pecos!" Mixler shouted. "You want to get out of there alive? Then come out with your hands up!"

Alive! His lips twisted in a smile. They'd kill him the second he showed himself in the portal.

"Pecos, we know you're in there. Come out with your hands up!"

He didn't answer. His voice, echoing in the depths, might have been heard by someone at the air shaft above. He waited, and after a long time, heard a thud, and smelled drifting dust as they rolled boulders from above, gradually cutting off the light, closing the portal.

It was quite dark. The horse, after some momentary nervousness, stood quietly. Pecos tied him to a timber and groped his way down the tunnel.

It was not a crosscut tunnel, driven straight to intercept a vein. It followed the vein and was unpredictably zig-zag. Finally he saw light, very dim, from above. The air shaft.

The shaft was also crooked, driven for the twin purposes of ventilation and exploration.

He left his rifle and climbed from one timber to the next. It was a couple hundred feet to the top. At last he saw the sky, broken into little irregular patches by the brush he'd thrown over the shaft collar.

Twenty feet from the surface, he stopped, braced his legs, breathed, listened. There was no sound. He tried to guess at the time. At least half an hour had passed since the portal was closed.

It was not difficult to work his way to the surface through dead branches. Sunlight, coming through smoke and spruce trees, seemed very bright. He paused, listened, and reassured by the perfect silence, he drew himself over the crib logs, and stood up.

Mixler and his men were gone. He found a wooden bar, levered rock from the tunnel mouth and rescued his horse. He returned to Jardine, whom he found somewhat stronger, and got him back to the forks of the Ironrod.

ALL WAS quiet where the ambush had met them with flame and bullets the night before. The fire had run in long, black fingers across the ridge to the south. He moved among scattered cattle, downstream, and came across Jim Swing, Hernandez, and Wolf Carson around a tiny campfire, siwashing trout on willow sticks.

He asked about Geppert and Pancake. No one had seen them since the night before. He ate, rested an hour, then he got up and swapped saddles on one of the fresh horses.

Hernandez was watching his face. He

knew Pecos perhaps better than any man alive, and the expression he read there made him stand, and hitch his gunbelt.

"You go for a ride, Keed?"

Pecos jerked his head in a nod.

"You maybe have an idea of visiting Mixler?"

"I think it's about time."

Hernandez laughed with a flash of his white teeth. "Now *thees* is the way Pecos should talk. *Thees* is the Pecos I like to ride weeth."

Jim was listening. He stalked forward. "He'll be waitin' for you, Pecos."

"I doubt it. Mixler thinks he's through with me for good. I'll have him pretty much by surprise."

Jim cursed and said, "Well, that means I'll have to ride along and take care of both of you."

They left Wolf Carson to care for Jardine, and rode at a stiff pace down-canyon. It was late afternoon, and already growing cool.

"Theenk they went back to the beeg herd?" Hernandez asked.

"I doubt it. They been a night without sleep like us. They'll camp someplace. Gets dark maybe we can spot their fire."

At twilight, they crossed a saddle in the ridge and looked across rolling hill country toward a valley running northwestward toward the Belle Fourche.

"That's Kettle Creek," Pecos said. "I reckon that's where they plugged me in the mine, only yonder, seven or eight mile farther up." He pointed out a place among the hills, "Kettle's pretty drybone this time of year, but you can always find good water at Trapper Springs. If I was Mixler, I guess that's where I'd stop."

Through twilight, a glimmer of fire came into view, and Hernandez, with an admiring chuckle, said, "Keed, you have the fine hunch. Why weeth these good hunch are you always the big sucker for roulette?"

Of the three, only Big Jim seemed cautious. They rode around grassy, pine-spotted hillsides, the Pecos Kid slouched in the saddle, hat over his eyes, apparently half asleep; Hernandez singing softly, in a scarcely audible voice, the words of some border song.

"Damn it, keep still," Jim finally whispered.

HERNANDEZ laughed. His laugh was like quiet music. "Jeem, it make you nervous, the thought that soon I will outdraw Señor Shoots-in-the-Back Glynn, so that the twelfth notch in his gun will be for *himself*, and another man will have to carve it for heem?"

"There'll be a hell of a lot of guns besides his."

"So perhaps you would like to make a wager. One thousand dollars, Señor, that at the pay-off it will be Hernandez on his feet and Star Glynn on the ground when—"

"Who'll pay me if you lose?"

"What talk is thees? You perhaps want your Hernandez to live only so you will be able to collect a bet? What kind of a friend are you that you worry about collecting money when the friend of your heart lies dead on the ground?"

"Oh, hell!" said Big Jim.

It had been thirty minutes since they'd seen the fire. Now, in the deepening gulch bottom, it was quite dark. The odor of burning wood came to them on the breeze, and somewhere in the chokecherry bramble a horse snorted.

Pecos said, "This is it!"

"You figure to ride right up?" Big Jim asked.

"No." The Kid pulled in. "Well, maybe I will, at that. Yes, I'll ride up. You boys get on each side." He jerked his head, indicating opposite sides of the gulch. "Stay back a little. Might be a sentry out. I doubt it. Mixler will feel pretty safe, but there might be. If there is, he'll stop me, and I'll let him know

you're there. That'll get us through."

He rode alone the last two hundred yards with the firelight broken into irregular patterns by intervening brush. Men were sitting around it. He couldn't tell how many. Someone stood, was bent over, silhouetted, moved away. It might have been Billy Six-Spot.

The path he followed, skirting the brush, was practically free of stones. His horse advanced almost soundlessly. He'd lost track of Hernandez and Jim. No sentry stepped out to meet him. Horses, hobbled and grazing in the bottoms, had their heads up, but his approach didn't make them run.

He pulled in, sat in thoughtful contemplation of the fire for a long thirty seconds. Without looking, he knew that Hernandez had come around on the other side of the brush and dismounted. He heard the slight *clink* of a spur as his heel came in contact with the ground.

Pecos dismounted then, tied his horse, and walked through brush, following a narrow little trail, holding twigs away.

He stopped at the edge of firelight. Men were sitting and lying on the ground. Across the fire, staring at him, lay Andy Rasmussen.

Andy had seen him. His eyes were fixed, staring. His jaw had sagged. He didn't seem to be breathing. He'd been eating a broiled, whole grouse, and in amazement he'd lowered it until it lay in the dirt.

Pecos grinned at him. It wasn't a pleasant grin. He disliked Rasmussen, had contempt for him, and the smile showed it.

THERE were six men by the fire. Besides Rasmussen, there were Star Glynn, Billy Six-Spot, Ellis Haltman, a cowboy called Alky, and Mixler. He wondered about Evas Williams. Maybe Evas had been killed.

Mixler was sitting crosslegged, his back turned. The long trail from Texas had taken him down, removed the last ounce of fat from him, dehydrated him, and yet he was big. Big like a bull elk just through a hard winter.

Mixler was talking. Something about the herd. ". . . No, when that fire runs out they'll drift back with the grass and water. We'll hold the main bunch on the Belle Fourche and send back for 'em. A few days' graze won't hurt. We'll be across the Yellowstone long before September first."

Billy Six-Spot, noticing the fixed nature of Rasmussen's gaze, turned and saw the Pecos Kid.

He started as though to lunge to his feet, and paused on one knee. It was almost reflex to reach for his gun, but he checked himself.

"Sure, Billy, live for a while," said Pecos, and stepped into the firelight.

Men sprang to their feet, but nobody went for his gun. Mixler was up. Huge and erect, he took a backward step. For just a second his face was slack with surprise, as though he was staring at a ghost.

Pecos said, "Funny thing about miners, they generally dig two holes, just like a prairie dog."

Mixler recovered himself. He showed his powerful teeth in something that resembled a smile. "Well, I'll be damned! You know, Pecos, a man's got to admire your kind of guts. I'm going to kill you, but I still got to admire your kind of guts."

"Takes guts to came here alone, all right. Of course, there's a chance I'm not alone. That's something you have to gamble on." As he talked, his eyes were on Mixler, but he kept watch of the others, too, and when Glynn, looking very slack and casual, started to drop back, he said, "Now, Star, that might be a number-one way of committing suicide. How you know but what I got six men out in the bushes? Why, six men would take care of every one here."

Rasmussen said in a whisper, scarcely audible, "He was alone up the canyon. He was holed up alone. Rest of 'em scattered. He's bluffing."

Still watching Mixler, he spoke to Rasmussen, "If you *believe* that, try going for your gun."

Rasmussen wouldn't do it. Mixler, perhaps, or Glynn, or Six-Spot, but not Rasmussen.

Pecos said, "I came for *you*, Mixler. Before heading over the ridge for Deadwood, I came for *you*."

Mixler's eyes kept moving around, probing the shadows. He licked his lips. He jerked his shoulders back with a brittle laugh. "But you got an ace in the hole."

"Nobody's going to kill you but me. I got a proposition for you. You leave your men by the fire. We'll walk over there, across the creek. There's not much light, but there's enough. We'll settle it there, the two of us. But maybe you haven't got that kind of guts."

HIS lips twisted down. He hated Pecos, he'd hated him from the first night when he'd noticed the girl, Lita Haltman, watching him.

"Why, you cheap gunhawk," Mixler spat. He stood with his hands on his hips. "I'll fight you with guns or I'll fight you with my hands. And when I'm through, you won't go over the ridge to Deadwood. You won't go anywhere. To hell with crossing the creek. Pecos, you're just ten seconds away from being a dead man."

Mixler stood with massive shoulders sloped forward a trifle. His eyes were very intent on Pecos. Beyond him, Star Glynn was on one knee, staring beyond them into the dark.

Neither Hernandez nor Big Jim were in that direction. The warning hit Pecos like the buzz of a rattler. It was Evas Williams. He'd been standing guard somewhere, now he was coming up from the shadow.

Pecos turned casually, and dived to one side. Guns exploded at the same instant. Two guns, one so close on the other their reports mingled.

A bullet had slugged him in the left shoulder. It was like being struck by a hammer. The scene seemed to veer, to slide across his eyeballs.

He saw Mixler draw. Flame and explosion burst in his face. He could feel the whip and burn of powder.

It all happened in an instant, while he was on his way to the ground.

His own gun was in his hand. He had no memory of drawing it. It was merely there. It seemed to aim and fire by itself. He was dully conscious of the hard buck of it at the same instant his outflung left hand touched the earth.

Mixler was hit. He reeled, clutching his throat with his left hand, six-shooter still in his right.

The Kid hit him with a second slug. Mixler still had his gun. It kept pouring flame and lead. He was firing blindly into the ground.

A third bullet sent him reeling back. Still he didn't go down. He half turned. Now his back was toward Pecos. He fired the last shot from the magazine. It tore a furrow through the fire. He took four or five gargantuan, stumbling steps. Star Glynn lay dead, face down, and Mixler trod over him. Then he fell.

His head was almost in the fire. He tried to get up. He reached and clawed handfuls of coals. Then the life left his muscles and he slid on his forehead across the ground.

There was shooting in the outer darkness. The Kid kept trying to gather his thoughts. At last he heard Hernandez's voice.

"You all right, Keed?"

Pecos looked up. Hernandez was crouched in the opening between two

chokecherry bushes, punching spent cartridges from his gun.

"I don't know. I feel like somebody hit me with a hammer. I feel like I just woke up from a three-day drunk."

"Ha! You are now dreaming of Deadwood. Tonight you took a bullet in the left arm. Look, your shirt sleeve is all heavy weeth blood. It was that bushwhacker, Evas Williams. I saw the shine of his gun just as he fired, so alas, I had not the time to save you from your wound."

"What the hell happened? That's Star Glynn, isn't it?"

"Sure, did I not say it would be thus? Did I not say I would pay heem for the bushwhack of Reavley? Also, I have won back one thousand dollars from that miser, Jim Swing. Feefty more nights like this will see your Hernandez freed of his awful burden of debt. Now sit still and I will bandage the wound."

"I'm all right. Where's Jim?" He called, "Jim!"

Jim's voice came from the uphill shadow. "Here! But you better stomp that fire out or they'll circle and make wolf meat of you."

Hernandez laughed with a bright flash of his teeth. He had his shirt off, tearing it in strips for bandage. "No. They will have little fight left. What was it the poet said? — *When the head is chopped off, the bird theenk only of flapping his wings.* So with those gunmen, I theenk they will fly far and stop only to fight when another man has dollars to pay them."

GEPPERT and Pancake had returned to the camp on Ironrod when they got back. Two days were spent hunting cattle, and with most of the herd, they pushed over a high backbone of the country toward Spearfish.

It was evening, and Pecos, riding the drag, reined in to roll himself a leisurely cigarette.

He looked back and to the north. There were foothills, prairie, the purplish breaks of the Belle Fourche, and more prairie. Still farther, over the uncertain, grayish horizon, lay the Yellowstone, and after the Yellowstone, the vast, almost untouched plains of Montana, the land where grass grew to a tall steer's belly.

Hernandez saw him and came back at a gallop. "Keed! Why do you stop? We must hurry. Just over the hill, maybe two-three days away, is there not the lights and women? Is there not music and good red wine? Is there not the Deadwood of our dreams?" He closed his eyes, entranced, and strummed a dream guitar, singing lazily.

"Ay, ay, ay, ay!
Canta y no llores."

"Sure, Butch. I'm sure with you for that Deadwood."

He was thinking that he'd have to spend a week in Deadwood. Hernandez would be broke by that time. Broke and borrowing money. In three weeks he'd have all of them broke. He'd leave after a week while they still had something left. With fresh horses, they could head back up the Belle Fourche, cross the Little Missouri, and meet the herd somewhere close to the Yellowstone.

It would be tough on the Haltmans, taking that big herd through. He had nothing against the Haltmans. Ellis was a hothead, but lots of men are hotheads at the age of twenty-one. Vern and Tommy were all right. And Lita . . .

Sometimes, at the most unexpected moment, the memory of Lita would hit him, and she'd be there again, beside him, slim and eager, her hands on his shirt, her dark eyes looking up at him. Yes, Lita was all right, too.

THE END

Wagon-Train Judgment

By CLARK GRAY

"Raise 'em, men," Jackson called.

It takes both guts and savvy to catch a pair of thieves as slick as Thames and Barlow. But it takes more than that, Jackson found, to keep their deadly testimony from dropping a noose over his head!

JACKSON had a gun, and he knew how to use it. But for certain reasons he was afraid of it. After dark he took it off. Carefully he wrapped the belt around the gun and shoved the whole business under the seat of the high-topped

Conestoga wagon he was riding in.

Then he threaded on long legs through the circle of fires around which the wagon train had drawn up for the night.

Pride put a stiffness in Jackson's lanky stride as he prowled the wagons on the far side of the circle. Jackson had a long face and a wide mouth. The flickering campfire light made his eyes look green. Presently Jackson located Thames and Barlow. He approached them warily.

Mark Thames squatted before a small heap of live coals, cooking a buffalo steak in a frying pan. Thames looked up and said, "Evening, Killer." There was contempt in the words.

Soberly Jackson put his back against the wheel of Thames' and Barlow's wagon. He lifted makings from his shirt pocket and built a smoke. He struck a match against the iron wagon tire. Over the match flame, he said, "I'll give you boys fair warning. Ride out of here tonight."

MARK THAMES was the little one, the brains. Cat-eyed, cat-like in his movements, and with about three long hairs laid back across his bald head. Both Thames and Barlow wore smoke-greased buckskins. It was this that had first aroused Jackson's suspicions.

Jackson lifted the flame to the twisted end of his smoke now. The flame sucked inward. The taste of smoke was one of the little things, the soothing things. Then Mark Thames said, "Why, Killer? Shore you ain't afraid of us! Not a man like you—with three murders under his belt."

Doggedly Jackson shook his head. "Thames, I don't like the smell of you two. I don't like the rumors I heard back in Fort Smith about the stealing that goes on in these wagon trains. It'd be too easy for you two to ride out some night with whatever you could lay your hands on."

Thoughtfully Mark Thames poked his buffalo steak with a green twig, then squinted across the frying pan at Barlow. Barlow was the muscle man. Big, slow, not too bright.

Thames said, "Johnny, run git Captain Calloway. Tell him his guide don't like our perfume. Ask him to come over here."

Johnny Barlow, the muscle man, grunted, hoisted his huge form and departed at a dogtrot. And Jackson, knowing that his bluff had failed, kept his back against the wagon wheel. He finished his smoke slowly. A faint bitterness rode through him, because he'd tried to do the right thing, the thing a prairie man ought to do.

Then Asa Calloway's heavy courtroom voice came booming across the wagon circle. Jackson sighed and made a half turn and watched Calloway approach. Calloway's eyes were hot with dislike.

"What's the idea, here, Jackson? What's your authority for ordering off these two men?"

Asa Calloway was a beefy, fair-haired man, with more than his share of charm. Calloway was honest, hard-working, decent, intelligent, a lawyer, a former state senator.

Jackson said grimly, "Captain, I'm just a poor country boy that's been to California and seen the elephant. But it happens I know snake smell better than you do. You'll have trouble if you let these two stay. That's my advice."

"Your advice," Calloway snapped, "is to pertain solely to the trail and the best way to reach California. You were not hired to give your opinion of human character. That is my job as Captain. A job to which I was elected by the members of the train. You'll do well to remember that."

Jackson said, in a sudden backlash of anger, "You never give up, do you, Calloway? Get down on a man once, and he's dirt from then on."

"I never learned," Calloway said coldly, "to care for murderers. If that's what you mean."

JACKSON took that the same way he had taken everything else from Calloway. Using all his stubborn patience to keep from fighting back, to hold any sign of the way it burned his pride. Because, Jackson thought, that was the only way he knew to get along now since he had given up his gun. Jackson clamped his lips shut, and because there wasn't anything else he could say, he kept them shut and turned on his heel and left.

He sensed a silence moving with him as he crossed the firelit circle of Arkansawyers. He realized they understood what had happened, even though Calloway had kept his voice low.

Jackson damned them under his breath. Back at his wagon he strapped on his gun again. He was thonging the holster to his leg when Julia said,

"Another fight with dad, Tom? When will you learn?"

Jackson straightened hurriedly. Julia had been standing behind the wagon. She moved forward now, a tiny white-clad figure just visible in the light from the fires. Julia's face was marked with the same old unhappiness.

"I couldn't help it," Jackson said. "Honest, honey, I try."

"But you're bound to prod him up," Julia said. "Oh, Tom—"

Jackson crossed to her. He put his hands on her elbows and lifted her toward him, feeling the soft vibrant aliveness of her lips, feeling the nameless excitement pulsing in him. He sighed and pushed her away.

"Honey, don't come here again. Your dad'd fair shoot me if he knew about it. And I couldn't blame him, knowin' the way he feels."

"But, Tom if you'd only—"

"I can't honey. I can't soft pedal him. Any more than I could keep from killing, when there was killing to be done."

Julia said, "I know, Tom. I guess I understand." Julia's voice was low-pitched, somber with the memory. Jackson stirred uneasily, his own memories coming back to life to torment him, as they did at times like this.

It had been an old story, the kind of story that never seemed old when it happened to you instead of the neighbor down the road.

Border outlaws on the run from a Kansas posse had stumbled on the little Indian Territory farm operated by Tom Jackson's mother and dad. Three of them. When the shooting was over, Jackson's mother and dad lay dead on the earthen cabin floor.

JACKSON had done what any man would do. He had followed the compulsion in him, and he had tracked the outlaws down. One by one, he had killed them. The first two, he had killed on the prairie, and there was no law to bother him for that. The third had holed up in Arkansas, where Jackson had found him.

And because this was in a town, some folks had called it murder. Asa Calloway among them. Calloway had been county attorney. Calloway had honestly tried to do his job as he conceived it, and besides that, Calloway was a man who believed that the law must be served. Calloway had ordered Jackson's arrest and trial.

The jury had acquitted Jackson over Calloway's strenuous objections. Embittered, and needing money, Jackson had signed up as guide for a wagon train which was leaving Fort Smith for the California gold fields, via Sante Fe and the southern route. Not until after his contract was signed did Jackson discover that Asa Calloway and Julia were members of the train.

Jackson said with a faint smile for the

pleasant part of his memories, "You should never have brought me that pie, honey, when I was in jail."

Julia looked at him tenderly, seeing his meaning. "It wouldn't have mattered, Tom. I'd have met you somehow. And loved you. They can't beat two people in love, darling."

"They can make a damned convincing try," Jackson said drily. "Julia, we're headed for more trouble. You remember rumors back in Fort Smith about trail robbers?"

He told her about his encounter with Thames and Barlow. Because he needed to talk away his bitterness, and because Julia would listen, he explained why trail robbers were so fiendishly hard to catch.

They couldn't be detected before the theft, Jackson said, and afterwards, pursuit was nearly impossible because it would mean delay. A tightly rationed wagon train could not afford delay. Word of the robbery got back to Arkansas slowly, if at all. In a few weeks or months, the bandits could repeat their thievery on some other unsuspecting train.

"The worst thing," Jackson said, "is that I can't stop it. You know about the contract I signed, Julia. And you know your own dad. He's been elected captain. The whole train, including me, is under his orders."

Julia said, "The silver."

"I know, damn it. Your dad's got the silver. It was a grand idea, Julia, making every man put up fifty dollars to see the train through any trouble we didn't expect. But it was a plumb bad idea of your dad's to change it all to silver and carry the silver in his wagon. We'll wake up and find that silver gone, some morning. Maybe tomorrow."

It was tomorrow. Thames and Barlow, being no fools, had evidently decided during the night to make their try while the trying was good. Jackson was roused out of his blankets at dawn by the trembling voice of Asa Calloway.

"Jackson! Jackson!" Asa Calloway was whispering as he shook Jackson's shoulder. "The silver's gone. Wake up, man."

JACKSON rolled to his elbow and shook the sleep from his head. He blinked at Asa Calloway, seeing the gaunt worry on the lawyer's face, and Jackson's first reaction was a grim pleasure. He sat up, fumbled for his makings in the shirt that hung beside him on the wagon tongue.

"They can't have been gone long," Calloway was whispering tensely. "I got up at four to get a drink of water. The silver was there then. Jackson, you've got to help me. I've got to get that silver back."

Jackson lit his smoke and took a quick glance around the sleeping camp. Jackson saw that Thames and Barlow's wagon still stood on the far side of the circle. Which meant that the two outlaws had stolen horses somehow. And that, in turn, meant that they planned a hard fast ride.

Jackson said, "How much did they get?"

"Just over five thousand dollars. I was sleeping outside the wagon for the sake of coolness. Julia was outside, too. Jackson, we've got to have a plan before the camp wakes up."

Jackson couldn't resist one bitter jibe. "You're the planner, Calloway. You didn't want my advice yesterday."

"All right, damn it. I was wrong. I admit it. But don't you see? You're the only one that can help. We Arkansawyers don't know how to handle a thing like this. You're a prairie man. You understand Thames and Barlow. You're one of—" Asa Calloway broke off, biting his lips.

"I'm one of them. Go ahead and say it, Calloway. Take a thief to catch a thief, eh? Damn you, do you think I'd help you

after the way you tried to get me hung? Go ahead and fry in your own juice."

Asa Calloway's handsome face assumed a courtroom dignity. The dignity, Jackson thought, with which Calloway met his defeats before judge and jury.

"Very well, Jackson. I'd hoped for help and understanding, in spite of what's past. I see that my original judgment of you was correct."

Jackson was not particularly proud of himself. He was even less proud when, after breakfast, he saw Asa Calloway call the wagon train members together. Calloway's face was white with strain, but he told them what had happened, explained to them why pursuit was impractical.

"It's no use," Asa Calloway said, "to try to get the money back. Thames and Barlow are too experienced in the ways of this country for us. But I promise you one thing. When we get to California, I'll repay this money. Somehow, sooner or later, I'll square this debt."

THE Arkansawyers did not appear to be satisfied with this. A promise, Jackson reflected, was not as good as money. And besides, many of the hill men were doubtless counting on that fifty dollars they had chipped in. They'd need it to establish themselves in the new land.

Jackson made his quiet study of the pinched, angry faces. He heard the muttering, and he sensed the flow of feeling against Asa Calloway. It gave Jackson a bleak delight to observe that the Arkansawyers blamed Calloway for this. He was clearing up his breakfast things when Julia crossed the circle to him. Julia's eyes made Jackson flush uncomfortably.

"Dad told me," Julia said. "Tom, I didn't believe you'd be the man to hold a grudge."

Jackson picked up a handful of sand and scoured a grease spot from the outside of his skillet. He didn't look at Julia. He framed his words, and yet at the same time he knew he could not frame them well enough to show Julia how he felt.

Jackson said, "I was hired to guide this train to California, Julia. Your dad made that plenty clear yesterday."

"Oh, bosh!" Julia dismissed this with an irritated wave of her hand. "Tom, there is such a thing as forgiveness."

"If there is," Jackson said bleakly, "your dad don't know it. You know why he wants me to ride after Thames and Barlow, Julia? Because he thinks I know their ways. Because he thinks I'm like 'em."

"What if he does? Tom, this is bigger than a personal grudge. The savings of a hundred men are at stake."

Tom Jackson was aware of the truth of this. It made him uncomfortable. And he unleashed the anger that he'd kept carefully hidden since the trial.

"Julia, do you know what it means to a man to be tried for his life? To set in a courtroom with handcuffs on your wrists, and have twelve strangers decide whether you can go on living or not? Do you know what that does to a man, especially when he's only been tryin' to do what he believed was right? Damn it, girl, don't talk to me about forgiveness. Get your loud-mouthed old man to do a little forgiving for a change."

Jackson halted, feeling the anger twitch his lips, knowing that he had let himself go too far, but not caring in the fury that rode him now. More and more, as the fury boiled in him, he was becoming certain that Julia and Asa Calloway did not understand what he had suffered. He felt Julia's eyes searching him, and there was surprise in Julia's face, and a kind of misery.

Julia said very quietly, "Tom, I'll tell you about my dad. I have lived with him

eighteen years. I know him. He has a pride that will never let him apologize—not if it kills him. I can understand that kind of pride, but I do not like it. I would not marry a man who had it. Never, Tom."

JACKSON understood her. He felt a pain grind through him, and for one moment he wondered if his stubbornness was worth the cost. But he could not back down now. Once a thing like this was begun, there was no breaking the pattern.

Jackson's next words came as if they were the lines of a play that he had memorized. He didn't have to think about them. They were there, waiting to be spoken.

"I can't," Jackson said, "change what I believe for any girl. I am what I am, Julia. You will have to take me that way."

Julia shook her head. Her eyes became haunted with a veiled sadness, and her face seemed to slenderize, to become finer boned and more beautiful.

"Tom, I am glad the silver was stolen. It has shown me a side of you that I would never have believed. Do anything you like. It doesn't matter now. Goodbye, Tom."

Julia turned and ran, her slender white figure darting in and out of the covered wagons. Watching, Jackson thought he saw Julia's shoulders convulse once in a sob, then she was gone and he turned back to the smouldering ashes of his campfire.

Jackson was not unhappy. He was numb and ashamed. But he knew unhappiness would come later. It was very like the time he'd found his parents dead on their cabin floor. Through the numbness then, Jackson had felt an emotion stronger than grief, and it was a compulsion for vengeance. Now, through his numbed sorrow at the loss of Julia, Jackson felt shame.

The feeling was a completely new one to him, for Jackson had never been ashamed of himself before. He finished clearing up his breakfast things, then saddled. And by the time that was done, Jackson had decided what he had to do.

He had lost Julia. Some deep instinct told him that. Julia had made up her mind about him. If Jackson rode after Thames and Barlow now, Julia would only believe he was trying to win her back. And as for Asa Calloway, Jackson knew that nothing would change Calloway's opinion. He, Jackson, would do better to locate another guide and leave the train.

Jackson rode his horse through the wagon circle to Asa Calloway's wagon. But when he reined in before Calloway and spoke, he did not speak as he'd planned.

Instead, he said, "You've got a straight trail to Sante Fe. You can't miss it. If I'm not back by then, hire you another guide."

Jackson touched spurs to his mount and rode at a gallop away from the train, heading north.

THAMES and Barlow had taken two horses. Jackson found their tracks leading up a dry wash that had kept them out of sight of camp as they retreated. Jackson stopped a mile from the wagon train, because if he was going to do this, he had to have a plan. Jackson eased one leg over his saddlehorn and lit a cigarette.

With two horses and five thousand dollars worth of silver, Thames and Barlow couldn't go far. Jackson had no idea how much five thousand dollars in silver weighed, but he had a notion it was several hundred pounds. Which meant Thames and Barlow would have to cache it.

Jackson closed his eyes and mapped the country in his mind. He had hunted buffalo here. He knew the water holes

and the trails. If he were Thames and Barlow, he thought, he'd head for the black sink.

Jackson tightened his cinch and rode. The sun was an hour high now. Its heat began to work into Jackson and presently his shirt was soaked with sweat. Jackson didn't mind the heat. He was used to it.

Jackson had spent much time on the prairie in earlier years. It had been his home. He had loved the silence, the immense aloneness of it, the sweep of the sun across the white bowl of the sky, the green smell of sage, the sense of utter self-reliance the prairie gives a man.

Now, for the first time since his parents' deaths, Jackson became aware of those feelings again, and he began to wonder whether his resentment of Asa Calloway was not a small thing, after all.

Jackson saw smoke at four in the afternoon. It came from the black sink, five miles ahead. Jackson pulled down off the skyline and found a jutting boulder, in whose shade he could rest his horse.

AT DUSK Jackson lay very quietly in the rocks that looked down on black sink. Black sink was a brackish waterhole formed by some flaw in the geological formation beneath the prairie. It took its name from the thin layer of oil that rainbowed the water. Thames and Barlow lay stretched beside the dying coals of the fire. The horses were staked a dozen rods away, grazing quietly.

For this, Jackson needed no plan, no advice. This was a business he knew, as Asa Calloway had remarked. Jackson brought his head out of the boulders and lifted his gun into view and said,

"Just lie there and take it easy, boys. Don't move, or you're dead."

Jackson was already advancing as he spoke, striding down through the rocks with his eyes on Thames and Barlow. Thames had tensed, lifted his head from the saddle that pillowed it, then dropped back. Barlow, slower witted, made an effort to scramble to his feet until a word from Thames stopped him.

Tom Jackson advanced grinning and lifted the guns from the two.

"You can sit up now. Where's the silver?"

Mark Thames came to a sitting position and brushed his three hairs carefully along his bald head.

- Men quaked at the mention of him. . . .
- Women sighed at the sight of him. . .
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Thames said, "You're crazy, Jackson. We've got no silver. We rode out last night, sure. After you let us know we wasn't wanted."

Tom Jackson shook his head. "That won't do, Thames. Because it happens I know where you buried it. You boys just sit quiet a minute."

Still grinning, Jackson searched among the rocks till he found one with a fairly sharp, flat edge. Using the rock as a tool, he scraped aside the bed of yellow coals and began to dig. He heard Barlow suck in an angry breath, and he laughed.

"You boys weren't very smart. On a hot day like this, nobody builds a fire at four in the afternoon. Not unless he wants to use the ashes to hide digging signs."

Mark Thames said quietly, "Get him, Johnny."

Jackson had half expected this. He was tense on his knees beside the coals. He lifted the gun and sighted quickly on Johnny Barlow, who was lumbering toward him like a sprawling ape.

Jackson fired at the shoulder. He saw Barlow spin half around by the force of the blow, then the big man stumbled over a rock and fell with a grunt. Flame lanced through the dust. A numbing pain throbbed along Tom Jackson's side, and he knew then that Mark Thames had sacrificed Barlow to give himself time to get another gun.

Thames was hunkered behind the saddle, the long barrel of a sixgun resting on the cantle. With no time to think, Jackson fired again, and as the gun bucked his hand he saw Mark Thames roll over screaming, clawing at his head. The violence of Thames' agony reminded Jackson somehow of a snapping wild animal. This thought crossed Jackson's mind, and at the same moment he heard behind him Johnny Barlow's roar of rage.

Whirling, Jackson snapped off a shot. Johnny Barlow had gotten off the ground and had been advancing on him with a knife. The snap shot broke Barlow in the middle and pitched him face forward into what was left of the dying bed of coals.

Silence came in like a wall of thunder, then. And Jackson was standing alone by the brackish water, with the smoke and smell of black gunpowder hanging over him. Jackson had a small pain in his side, not serious, and suddenly his hands were shaking, and he dropped his gun and heard it strike a rock with a metallic clank.

Moving like a mindless machine, Jackson crossed to inspect Thames, then Barlow. Both men were dead. Jackson shook his head slowly, dully. He picked up his flat-edged rock and began to dig.

He saw the wagon train dust two days later. He rode out of the hills leading the two horses, with the silver neatly sacked and evenly loaded between them. He watched the train move toward him, a long white snake that was composed of men and women and children and animals, a little chunk of civilization that had depended on him, Jackson.

It came to Jackson that he had not failed then. Whatever they thought, Jackson reflected, however they judged him, it made no difference. The important thing was the way Jackson judged himself, and in that, he was satisfied.

THE circle had been made, and supper smells drifted across the prairie when Jackson approached the train and Julia Colloway's wagon. Julia was cooking a pot of stew and another of coffee.

Jackson sat his horse in the dark a moment, savoring the smells, and savoring, too, the sight of Julia in her white dress as she moved efficiently around the fire. Then he clucked to horse and rode in to the fire.

"I'm back, Julia."

Julia stared in surprise at the sound of his voice. Julia's eyes took in the two horses behind him, the sacks of silver.

(Continued on page 130)

Bullet-Checked

Jorie smashed him savagely on the chin.

By

GIFF CHESHIRE

THE BULLET had passed within inches of Jorie's head. There was no place to fort up, no time to pull his gun. The second shot nicked the ear of his horse. The next took Jorie out of the saddle, and that was the last he knew.

The black pain split to let the twilight through finally. He got his eyes open in

What does a man do, Jorie Games wondered, when he finds he's delivered his own death-warrant, signed and sealed, to the very hombre who has paid to have him killed?

a slow, conscious effort. A girl was bent over him, the girl from back there.

She said, "Why didn't you say someone was after you?"

She had bound his head and emptied a canteen on his face, for it and his shirt were soaked with something besides blood. "I'm obliged," Jorie gasped. He tried to get up but managed only to reach a sit, and for a moment the pain dipped and spun in his head. He shook it and his stare made the girl meet his eyes. "As far as I know, it was you."

"A fair supposition," she answered promptly. "But I would have been more accurate. Too bad I wasn't more suspicious, too. I'd just saddled when I heard shooting. I got close enough to see a man squatted by you. I don't know who. He swung up and rode when he sighted me."

Jorie got to his feet. "Ma'am, I threw a jolt into you when I asked how to get to King's." He saw she had caught his horse while waiting for him to come to. "At the time, I set it down to uneasiness since you seemed to be alone back there. Going my way? They call me Jorie Games."

"I'm Lillie Peers. You think I'm lying, and that's your privilege. It does make me nervous to be alone when a stranger rides in. I probably show it."

"Specially if they mention they want to make a meeting at King's?" Jorie asked. "I can name a man who might not want me to cut it. It happens you're the only one hereabouts who knew I was heading for it."

He wasn't sure about her. She was a dark, slight girl, beautifully shaped in a summer weight blouse and riding skirt. There was more stubbornness to her mouth than he liked in a woman. Spirit showed in her eyes and maybe the makings of fire, if a man could kindle it. But the facts were as he had stated them.

"I couldn't say as to that," said Lillie Peers. "I'm going your way. It happens I'm attending the meeting myself. I didn't want to offer to show you the way. I guess I'd better say something I'd rather not. The busher used his rifle in those cottonwoods down there. In this light he might have figured it was a woman until he came closer. That's what he'd expect to see riding past about now."

A mutual study came up between them. Jorie's shoulders lifted in a light shrug. "Let's ride."

"You'd ought to have a doctor fix that gash in your scalp."

"Later," Jorie grunted. He watched her swing up. He pulled himself aboard, the exertion exploding pain in his skull. Thereafter he let her point the way to Bike King's greasy-sack spread, where an unsuspecting man's fate was to be decided.

It was full night when they dropped down into a coulee and rode in to the place. Several saddle horses in the ranchyard told Jorie the meeting had started. The yellow lamplight showed men's shapes through the windows. A voice rose in volume as Jorie moved toward the porch with Lillie Peers. His hand touched her shoulder to stop her. The voice coming through the door carried a raging intensity.

"We come here to settle the thing! We know if anything's done about Syring, we've got to do it! We never had enough grass anyhow. Let him run sheep, and we cowmen had better quit. Now, there's only one way to stop him. Powder and lead, the only way them things ever are settled proper." There was a pause. "Me, I set next to Syring. I say let's do it right. What's more, let's do it tonight."

WHEN Jorie moved, Lillie mounted the steps with him. Her entrance brought nods of greeting, then half a dozen men stared at Jorie from seats about the room. He was hatless, wearing a bloodstained bandage. He understood their surprise.

"Howdy, Lillie," a man called.

"Weren't expecting you to bring a stranger."

"We fell in together coming over," Lillie said lightly. She took the chair a man shoved toward her. She smiled at the one who had greeted her. "But he told me he was in a sweat to make the meeting, Bike. It must be important."

Jorie studied Bike King, seeing a gaunt, white-haired and kindly looking man. The hulking individual next to King spoke up, his voice identifying him as Clagget, who had made the appeal to hate.

"And just why, bucko?" Clagget asked.

There was no real ease behind the grin that came to Jorie's lips. "To tell the boys you're grinding an ax you aren't letting them know about." He saw Lillie start. Clagget's eyes took on a glittering shock. "You want a sheeper killed, Clagget, and you want to make it a neighborhood job. I'm here to tell 'em not to get sucked into it. If you want a man dead, why don't you go and kill him?"

"You're drunk, crazy or workin' for Syring!" Clagget roared. "Whichever, I don't let that kind of talk pass! Bucko, if *you'd* rather die with a gun in your hand, make your reach!"

"Wait a minute!" Bike King looked around the room, shifting position to obstruct Clagget's gun hand. He eyed Jorie. "You've made blunt talk. Justify it, plenty and fast."

"Graden Clagget doesn't want me to, which same he figured he'd stop with that hogleg. You men all know Dave Raleigh."

"Ought to," King snapped. "The old lunatic leased his graze to sheeper Syring."

"And he sent me to see you," Jorie said. "I ride with his Salmon River crew. Asked directions of somebody's wife, down the trail. She told me you were meeting here to run a sheeper out."

"What does Dave Raleigh have to say to justify the trick he pulled on his old neighbors?" a man asked, speaking up for the first time. "And make it good."

"Get out of the way, Bike!" Clagget fumed. "This is a trick. Leave me handle the huckleberry, if he's got the stomach to back his talk with his gun."

"I've got a letter from Raleigh to back it," Jorie said. He slid a hand into a shirt pocket and brought forth an envelope, then stood transfixed. It had been slit open, and the contents were gone. Then the empty envelope had been replaced. "I *had* a letter," he amended weakly. "I reckon whoever tried to bushwhack me's got it now." He couldn't help looking at Lillie, and he saw her straighten and turn pale.

The laugh from Clagget was loud and ugly, with others joining in. Jorie went cold. They'd let Clagget crowd his fight now. Jorie wasn't even sure his gun was reliable.

"Since you've proved yourself a liar," Clagget thundered, "what's the lie you aimed to tell about me?"

The futility of his position had drained Jorie. He could tell the full truth, and it would only be shouted down.

Clagget was looking around, openly pleased. "Boys, for your entertainment, I'll teach this customer a lesson. Then we'll tend to our serious business with Syring."

"Outside, then," King grunted. But it was full assent.

Jorie looked at Lillie. She could lend credence to his message by telling about the bushwhacker she claimed to have seen hunkering beside him, back there. She met his eyes for a brief interval then looked away, showing no inclination to say anything.

IN A FLAT voice Jorie said, "This is what Dave Raleigh had to tell you. That lease was handled through an agent. Raleigh figured it was to be used for cattle graze until somebody wrote him a hot letter about sheep. Then he wrote and

gave the agent hell. Then's when he learned Graden Clagget was runnin' a sandy on his neighbors. Clagget interested the sheeper in that graze, then bribed the agent to pull the wool over Raleigh's eyes."

"Why in tarnation would he do a thing like that?" A spry looking little oldster stopped gumming tobacco long enough to gasp the question. "Clagget's made most of the talk in this move to run the sheeper out."

"I don't know if anybody besides Clagget can answer that," Jorie said. "And I don't expect him to. Here's the rest of what Raleigh told you in that letter. From all accounts, the sheeper's an innocent party. Raleigh aims to find him new graze and stand the expense of moving to make it right with all concerned." He turned to King. "You don't have to believe me. Just hold off long enough to write Raleigh yourself and get an answer."

"Hold off nothing!" Clagget blazed. "Boys, if you can't smell fish you can't smell sheep. I'm calling you a liar, bucko. If that don't make you fill your hand, you're a yellow-bellied—"

"Outside first," King said mildly.

Lillie's silence was broken at last in a careful voice. "Not guns, boys. I'd like to see if Jorie Games is willing to fight for his veracity. But, after all, there's a lady present. Let's keep it within limits."

Jorie looked at Clagget. "All right, mister. Outside."

He had never hated a woman so much in his life. Her silence had left him in this futile position. She knew he had been knocked cold from his saddle and was in no shape to fight a man as big as Clagget. But she had shifted it from guns to fists. Maybe she knew a fight had to come after Clagget's stand and realized, herself, that there might have been some gun tampering. Jorie stalked out into the yard, hearing the scrape of boots behind him.

Both men unstrapped their shell belts and tossed them aside. Without waiting to square off, Clagget charged Jorie, both fists throwing punches. Evading it, Jorie felt the jar to his shoulder when his knuckles cracked on the man's chin. He heard a grunt of shock but realized he had done little beyond exploding Clagget's fury. Clagget bore in, reaching with clutching hands. He got hold of Jorie and tried to throw him, but Jorie managed to drive a fist to his belly.

He thought he was free, but Clagget held and kneed him deliberately. For a moment Jorie felt the way he had when the slug spilled him from his saddle. He grabbed Clagget's head, pitting strength against strength. Clagget was pulling wind heavily, making a triumphant gurgle. Jorie was hurt and knew that when he had been whipped, the ground he had gained here would be lost.

He thought of Lillie and wondered if she was smiling in satisfaction. This caused him to give in angrily to Clagget's pull, making the man take a hasty backstep to hold his balance.

Jorie let go and hit him savagely on the chin. Clagget kept backing, his legs slack. Jorie followed with a vicious left to the neck. Clagget made no effort to break his fall when he went down. He didn't try to get up.

It had been close. Jorie blinked the sweat from his eyes. He couldn't see Lilly, nor tell how the rest had taken it.

"Well," King drawled, "you whipped a tough hombre, stranger. But that only proves you're a tough one, too. Don't know who you're working for or what at. But it didn't come off. You better light your shuck."

"You look intelligent, King. Raleigh said you throw weight around here. Keep your neighbors hobbled. Don't listen to Clagget till you've exchanged letters with Raleigh. Then see who's lying and do what you please. Me, I've done my best with a job I didn't ask for." Jorie picked

up his gun belt and buckled it about him. He started toward his horse.

LILLIE followed. He had trouble swinging up and made it to find she had mounted lightly. Her horse moved beside his when he rode out.

"Thanks for the help," Jorie grunted.

"You're welcome. Where are you going now?"

"Home to Salmon River."

"Would you believe me if I said I had to play it that way?"

"No."

"Come home with me and have something to eat. Maybe I can clear things up a little." Warmth had come into her voice, a husky mellowness. Starlight fell upon them, and the scent of perfume or a good soap drifted to him. She was beautiful, wonderful and maddening because of things that didn't make sense. Maybe she would explain now, or maybe she'd suck him into something he would be sorry for. At the turnoff to town he kept on beside her and rode in toward a darkened ranchhouse.

An hour later they were at supper, and still no one else had disclosed his presence. She had fixed a full meal and it was good. The frills of her apron made her seem more gentle and feminine than before, and it was hard to remember she had claimed to be a better shot than the bushwhacker.

"If you've cooled off enough to think," Lillie said finally, "let me ask you a question. Who up here could possibly know that Raleigh was sending a man with a letter?"

"That's had me stumped," Jorie admitted.

"Then doesn't it make better sense that someone was trying to stop me, the way I suggested?"

"Stop you from what?"

"From trying, in effect, what you tried." Lillie put down her fork and placed her elbows on the table, studying him. "I think this person frisked you, when he realized his mistake, to find out who he'd plugged. Discovering that letter was just a windfall."

"Why," Jorie asked, "would anybody want to stop you?"

"I was hoping you'd ask that when you stopped feeling abused. I also had the power to complicate matters for Clagget, and he knew it. He warned me to stay away from that meeting. When you stated the whole thing so baldly, I pretended to be skeptical to set him at ease about me. Because maybe I can help prove what you charged, with him off guard."

Jorie quit eating, too, catching some of her excitement. "Want to tell me how?"

"More than anything, because I've been scared to death. Sheeper Syring has a wonderful wife and three darling children. He's a fine man, even if he is in a business we cow people don't cotton to. As Dave Raleigh discerned, Syring is an innocent party to a dirty deal. With Graden Clagget doing the dealing.

"My spread sets next to Clagget on the side opposite Syring. About a year ago Clagget tried to buy my father out at a ridiculous price. All kinds of disasters came our way, seemingly by chance. My father wouldn't sell, and he was killed a few months ago. Apparently thrown and dragged by his horse. Afterward Clagget doubled his effort to buy, till I ordered him to stay away from me."

"He realized you were suspicious?" Jorie asked.

"I couldn't help showing it. But if I had voiced it in support of your charges, Clagget would know exactly what he's got to contend with. Now he figures I'm not sure enough to take action. Or too scared to. Which same I might be, without your help."

JORIE scratched his neck. "So Clagget bushed me, and Clagget has Raleigh's letter. And right now he figures he's the

smartest, luckiest jigger in the country. Which same they call over-confidence, which is what you aim to work on."

"No wonder Dave Raleigh picked you," Lillie breathed. "You're smart. And spunky. Do you understand the Syring business now?"

"Sure. Clagget figures Raleigh's got too much property and wants to relieve him of this piece cheap. He ran a sheeper in on Raleigh to get the neighborhood in an uproar. He's fanned the fire with his own hat, covering himself and hoping for a blood-letting. After a mess like that, he figures, Raleigh would let the spread go at any price, just to get out of it. Which is about as cold-blooded a calculation as I can think of."

"Remember my father," Lillie answered grimly.

"So where do you aim to hit him, and what with?"

"I think you sold your medicine about them waiting till they've swapped letters with Raleigh. With me scared shut and you discredited and apparently on your way home, Clagget will redouble his efforts to get the Syrings killed off and probably the real estate agent bought off or quieted. Then he's free to press his play the way he first figured it."

"Which still includes grabbing off your spread, probably."

"You don't have to tell me." Lillie smiled. "That's where you come in. Stop all that. At the risk of my reputation, I'll hide you here while you do."

The words stopped his heart for a beat. He liked her intensely, and thought that already her eyes showed a glow. This woman had faced realities and learned to accept what could be. Yet it wasn't promise he saw there, exactly, and he knew without being able to care much that all this could still be deceit.

"You're taking a long chance," he said bluntly.

"When I've got to take one, I do."

He liked the way she shaped a thought in his mind then let him take credit for it. She knew men, and however she had gained the knowledge, that much was to the good. He saw already what she had had in mind when she shaped the situation so carefully.

The main thing was to check the violence, forcing Clagget to expose himself more. Many a man had picked up a windfall by letting his enemy feel too secure.

Jorie rose from the table yawning. "If you don't mind, I'll go down to the barn and hit the hay."

"Thank you," she said. He saw she meant it.

His scalp wound was sore and painful the next morning. But since the impression had to be that he had quit the country, he didn't dare ride in to see a doctor. Lillie redressed it, reporting it in good shape. The sleep had taken the shock and inertia out of him. A good breakfast and her presence while he ate it did the rest.

He could understand Clagget's liking this ranch, for anyone would. It lay in a narrow valley where thinned pine broke the wind. All about rose a girdle of tiered hills, beautiful to behold and useful for winter shelter. It amazed him that Lillie had been able to carry on alone, though she admitted that it was poorly stocked due to sour luck and plain whittling.

HE TOOK it easy through that day, keeping close to the house. By evening he knew he needed a job or was going to find it difficult to remember the conventions. He was worried about his horse, with its big DR brand, being in the day corral for anyone to notice who happened to ride into the ranchyard.

He moved it into the barn and afterward puttered about there. Even so his mind refused to relinquish the image of a slight, slim figure, of warm, dark eyes. Quit it, he warned himself. If you can fork a saddle two weeks from now you'll

be home. That's all you can hope for.

At supper Jorie said, "I'll need your help to convince them I'm on the square. Before morning we'll get affidavits from Syring and the land agent as to the real nature of that lease deal. We'll show them to Bike King, which will check a raid on Syring until the thing can be threshed out. And leave 'em with King in case anything happens to you and me."

"Don't talk that way."

He grinned. "I didn't deal the cards."

Lillie straightened in her chair. "Jorie, is that something trying to happen now? Isn't that horses coming?"

It was plain when he listened, the distant clatter of massed hoofs. He breathed, "Lordy," and looked around.

"Just wait in the other room where it's dark," Lillie said. "I might need help." She began to tuck the extra dishes out of sight.

He crossed the room, stepping into the darkness beyond the inside door. When the riders came up he judged them to be three or four in number. Someone called, and when Lillie stepped to the outer door she left it open.

Graden Clagget's heavy voice called, "Lillie! What happened to that loud-mouthed cuss you showed up with last night?"

"How would I know?" she answered sharply.

"You left together."

"Because we happened to be going in the same direction. He could have gone a thousand places after he left the fork. Why do you need three tough hands to side you, Clagget? Has something thrown a scare into you?"

"I don't scare," Clagget retorted. "It couldn't be, Lillie, that you fell for his wild yarn? I recollect you threw some wild talk my way once, yourself, about your dad. Right now I wouldn't cotton to more of same. Figured I better tell you."

"Warn me, you mean."

"Call it what you like. We're raiding Syring tonight. I wanted to make sure you keep a bite on your tongue."

Jorie heard Lillie gasp. "Who's raiding Syring?" she demanded.

"Some of us who don't like sheepers. So long, gal. A woman who lives alone runs a lot of risks. Just remember that." A staccato beat of hoofs, and they were gone.

Lillie came inside and carefully shut the door. Jorie waited several minutes before he risked coming back to the light.

Lillie's face was pale. "Hear it?"

"Yeah. No chance now to handle it with sense. Clagget'll use his own bunch to raid Syring then disclaim it or claim others were in on it. I'll have to go help Syring, and you'll have to show me how to get there."

"Maybe this is the over-confidence we hoped for. But if there's any of that around, I haven't got it." Lillie stood a moment in thought. "We'll get Bike King. He's sensible enough to want to hold off till he knows the truth. He can round up some of the others, and we'll go to Syring's."

"If King'll listen to us."

"He and Dad were close friends. I'll have to tell him what I think about that, too."

THEY made a swift ride of it, dropping down into King's saucer and detecting lamplight in the little house. King had come to the yard by the time they rode in. He flung a glance through the starlight at Jorie's hatless, bandaged head.

Before they could speak, King grunted, "Where in tarnation has that smart jasper been?"

Lillie straightened in the saddle. "At my place, Bike. There's no time for a lecture and don't start one. Clagget's raiding Syring tonight, probably using his own outfit. You don't want that."

"Don't know why I don't!" King thun-

dered. "This fellow's yarn was mighty fishy. I liked your pa, Lillie. And always figured he raised a smart girl and one who could keep her head."

Jorie saw Lillie stiffen as the suspicion in the old man's voice slapped her. At that moment he knew the clean-minded trust she had put in her guest would cancel all that she or he could say from now on.

"Have you written Dave Raleigh, King?" Jorie asked.

"Well, yeah. Took the letter to the post office today. And his'n had better back you, bucko."

"Let's go, Jorie," Lillie said, and she swung her horse.

There was nothing he could say to her. He hadn't expected it to be advertised where he had stayed, hadn't actually thought that far, really. He had succeeded in spiking a few of Clagget's guns, a small gain for the price.

Lillie wasn't even thinking about it, apparently. At the top of the rise she swung her horse, and he knew she was heading for Syring's. Accepting the fact that there was only the two of them to help the sheeper against Clagget's outfit. It was still short of most people's bedtime, and Clagget wouldn't strike for a few hours yet, his visit to Lillie's having been only a precaution.

Presently she made a loop to the right and, after a distance, swung back again. Jorie knew they had swung below Clagget's home ranch, getting in to Syring's. A pulse beat hard in his throat.

When they sighted ranch structures in the far distance, he halted her in the starlight. His thumping throat had now formed a lump. Reaching, he took her hand. "There's excitement coming, and I might not get a chance to say what I want. That something's hit me up here and changed night into day. You, Lillie. I love you."

"You're under no obligation—" she began. Her voice softened, and she said, "Do you mean it, Jorie?"

"Yes."

He swung his horse, and she leaned toward him as his hand drew her gently. But she only allowed her cheek to touch his for a brief moment, then she straightened and started her horse.

"That was because I'm scared, Jorie. I've been scared a long while. And it's good to have something nice for a little while."

"Why a little while?"

"Salmon River is a long ways off."

Chained sheep dogs let out a racket as they rode in. Jorie was glad of their presence, for they would nullify any effort Clagget might make at surprise. Lillie called out, and her voice was recognized apparently, for the dogs grew quiet. A man stood in the yard when they rode in, a tall, lean young fellow.

He said, "Why, hello, Lillie! What's got you out?"

"Graden Clagget. They're riding on you tonight, Tony. This is Jorie Games, one of Dave Raleigh's men. We're here to help you."

There was silence, then Syring grunted, "Thanks. Go on in. I'll take care of your horses." He shook hands as Jorie swung down.

JORIE liked him. He went with Syring to the corral, then returned to the house. Though he must have been given a jolt, the sheepman took it quietly. Inside, Jorie met his wife, a dark, pretty woman. The children Lillie had mentioned were apparently in bed. The mother was pale, from what Lillie had told her probably, but every bit the easy and gracious hostess.

"It's nice to have company, Mister Games. We haven't had much since we moved here. Tony, where will we put the children if there's to be shooting?"

Something ached in Jorie. It was a

They flung apart at Jorie's first shot.

frontier woman's acceptance of danger, and he knew why Lillie had wanted to help them at whatever cost to herself. He said, "We've got one advantage. Clagget thought Lillie was alone. Since she wouldn't side me, he figures she won't you. Certainly not with a man and pretty fair shot to help. They'll try for surprise, and we've got to turn that on 'em."

Syring looked interested. "How?"

"Could you quiet down those dogs for a while?"

"I expect so. They're well trained."

"Good. Have 'em ready to turn loose, but keep 'em quiet until Clagget gets in close. We'll open the ball with dogs and guns, and try to keep the shooting away from the kids and women. Can you do it?"

"Can and will," Syring said.

While the sheepman checked a revolver and rifle, Jorie looked to his own gun. Both men avoided the eyes of the quiet, watching women when they slipped out-

doors. There were four sheep dogs, Jorie discovered, trained to be gentle with the flock but vicious with all predators. They showed eager affection when Syring walked up, accepting Jorie because he was with the man.

It surprised Jorie when Syring introduced them. "Queen, Jack, Wolf, Diablo —this is our friend." He began to stroke their heads. "Quiet. Quiet until I say the word." The man was Basque, apparently. His voice was musical, tender. With the dogs on leash they moved out toward a ridge that would obviously be Clagget's point of attack.

They waited short of the rise, Jorie keeping watch on the distance, Syring keeping a space below with the dogs. Once a coyote howled, and Jorie heard the dogs stirring. Syring spoke, and they kept quiet. It looked like this thing had a chance

Yet Jorie's eyes strained from watching the distance before he saw anything of significance. Then it was only the merest impression of movement far out in the night. But he heard Syring speak quickly to the dogs and knew this was it. Riders, moving toward the house and disdaining the flock for live sheep could not talk and menace Graden Clagget.

Presently the approaching mass began to separate into horses and riders, moving at a quiet walk. Six of them, which from what Lillie had told him comprised Clagget's outfit. The party halted presently, swinging down to sneak on in afoot. "Hold the dogs till I've made 'em take cover," Jorie called softly to Syring. He had Syring's rifle in place before him. They swung apart as they came in, already beginning to crouch.

Picking a central figure, Jorie fired and jacked quickly. They flung farther apart, dropping, one going down in a deadweight spill. He shot again with undiscernible effect, then flame began to wink along the ground ahead.

"Now!" he called to Syring. "Keep them on their feet!"

ONE by one, as Syring swiftly loosened leashes, the big dogs cut out in growling rushes, egged on by the sheepman's command. One dropped in a rolling spill half across the open, but the others drove on. Men were scrambling up then, kicking, twisting, shooting wildly at the dark figures that had attacked them.

Jorie pushed to his feet and paced forward, Syring beside him, both shooting in careful persistence. A man fell and didn't try to fight off the dog that leaped at him. Another shot and dropped the animal cutting toward him. Two others swung and drove toward the horses, which the uproar had already run off in fright. Syring and Jorie fired together, and they were down.

Fast and vicious though it was, Jorie was glad when it was over. Syring called off the two remaining dogs, though with difficulty in the fury that heated them. Three men were dead, badly torn by the dogs. Three lived, unattacked by the animals but with lead in them. One of these was Graden Clagget, shot through the chest and unconscious. It had been so swift that the raid had never really gotten started.

"Me, I feel more sorry for the dead dogs," Jorie said.

"Don't," Syring answered softly. "They kept it away from our young ones. The dogs love the young ones." He stiffened. "Somebody else is coming. Do we have it to do again?"

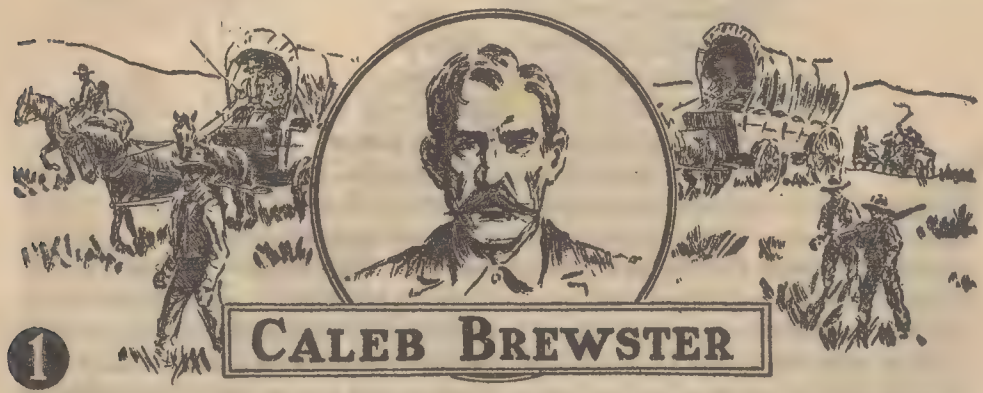
They waited where they were, for three riders were pounding openly across the plateau. They yelled as they came up, and Jorie recognized the voice of Bike King. "Hey, Syring! We're comin' as friends! Okay?"

"When you come that way, it is always okay!" Syring called back.

(Continued on page 129)

BUILDERS OF THE FRONTIER

by NICHOLS and ROSS



1 CALEB BREWSTER

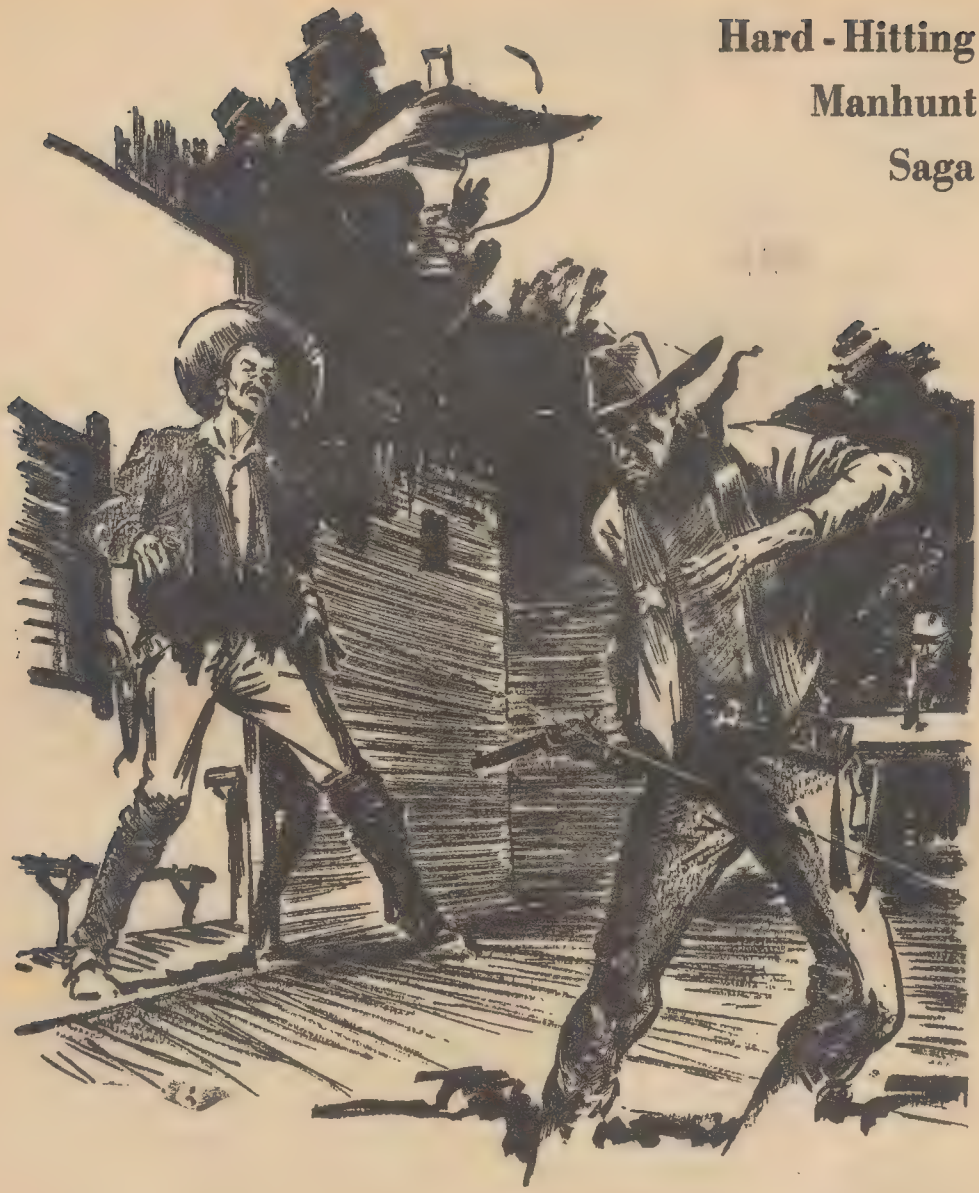
Caleb Brewster convinced thirty of his farm neighbors that digging away at their barren Vermont lands was sheer folly. The place to go was West where the land was virgin and a man could feed his family regularly. The farmers pooled their meager resources and followed Caleb westward.

2 When they reached St. Louis, the party met a fast-talking promoter who sold them a supposedly thriving Texas town called Skyville. Two months later they reached the "thriving town." Skyville was only vast acres of uncultivated land. However, after long hours of back breaking work they gathered their first harvest. The sun-soaked Rio Grande country had paid off. They now owned valuable land.

3 The farmers' sudden wealth attracted hordes of gunmen, among them the notorious gambler, Pike Davis. Pike was soon boss of Skyville. He set up crooked gaming palaces that fleeced all comers. Brewster saw this glorious land become a gamblers' paradise. He threatened to call in the Rangers. Davis worked fast. He kidnapped Brewster's young son. He would trade him for Brewster's deed to Skyville.

4 "The only deed you will get from me is one to boothill!" Brewster answered. Together with his neighbors, the farmer charged Pike's headquarters. The gunman, seeing the enraged mob, knew his days as kingpin were over. Using the boy as a shield, he made for the desert. He was almost out of sight when the God-fearing Brewster uttered a brief prayer and raised his gun. His aim was true. The gambler was buried where he fell. The gambling house was burned to the ground. Skyville was free again. Years later, Brewster's son became the seventh mayor of this thriving community.

Hard-Hitting Manhunt Saga



By MICHAEL KIRBY

Someday, perhaps, the deadly hatred that seethed between Parson Durkee and his hand-picked badge-toter would burst into a blazing holocaust of gunflame and powdersmoke—but until that far-off, dreamed-of time, Rocky Corbett must live on as a broken, embittered prisoner, in a bleak hell of his own making!

Port of Missing Gunmen

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The kid's gun barked once.

CHAPTER ONE

The Devil's Badge-Toter

PARSON DURKEE didn't look up when he heard Sheriff Corbett enter the bare little office. The Parson weighed two hundred and forty pounds, and didn't believe in waste effort. He kept

his gaze on the neat row of pencilled figures on his desk.

"There's a stranger got his horse hitched to the Lucky Chance rack, Rocky," the Parson wheezed. "Go down an' see about it."

That was Parson Durkee's way of telling his hand-picked badge-toter to pass sentence on the newcomer. If he appeared solvent, the stranger could be arrested on a trumped-up charge and the fine would fit nicely in the Parson's already bulging pockets. If he looked really flush, a couple of cold-deck tin-horns—thoughtfully supplied by Durkee for just such occasions—would be only too glad to change his financial status.

And as always, in case of argument, Rocky Corbett would be there with his bone-handled gun and the trigger-skill which had won him his job—a gaunted, spectral ambassador of boothill.

Corbett's fingers toyed with the nickeled badge he kept in his lower vest pocket. That emblem was to him a constant, corrosive reminder of promises unkept, of a life which had been wasted. He hated everything it stood for in this remote country, but even more than he hated that bit of metal, he dreaded the prison stripes which were still awaiting him back at Sundance.

"I saw the boy come in, Parse," he said tonelessly. "Bay geldin'. Pitchfork brand on the left flank. Miles City rig. Driftin' cowhand, travelin' light. Small pickin's."

The Parson looked up then, the habitual smile still bowed on his fat little lips. "I'm the judge of that," he reminded Corbett. "Git down there pronto."

Suddenly the sharp edges of the badge bit into Corbett's fingers. Despite two years in this adobe town of sun and heat, his thin, emaciated face had never lost its prison pallor, nor his eyes their desperate hunted look. Yet now rebellion flickered in their bleak depths.

"This feller's just a youngster, Parse. He ain't anything to git het up about," Corbett said earnestly. "Seein' him come in, tired an' dusty, damn glad to hit a place where he can git a drink an' listen to a human voice after a week ridin' over the malpai. Then knowin' if he gits out at all, it'll be on foot, headed south to die of thirst in the lava beds."

"He can stay if he wants to," said Durkee in an amused voice.

"So could other gents who was here when I first came," reminded the sheriff. "Elkins, the little store-keeper, who wouldn't sell out at your price. The feller who ran that ranch at Burned Corral whose mortgage you bought from the bank at Fo't Worth. An' the kid from Deaf Smith County who wouldn't swallow the brand of poker they play at the Lucky Chance."

The Parson's fat fingers brushed a cigar ash from the sleeve of his rusty frock coat. "This chicken-hearted stuff don't become you, Rocky," he said. "Hell, you're a born gunman. It's about time you got honest with yourself an' admitted to it."

"I ain't a born killer, though," Corbett replied tightly. "I gave each one of 'em a break when it come to drawin'. Most mebbe they wouldn't have drawed their guns, anyhow, except that you made 'em so mad they didn't use their heads. But as it was, it was either my life or theirs, an' I was carryin' out your own brand of crooked law.

"The thing that gets me is rememberin' those gents before they got drove so far. Decent, peaceable fellers who only wanted to be let alone, to live their own lives an' look out for their families. No, Parse, there's some things that even I get sick of.- I'm ridin' out!"

THE Parson's oil-smooth voice halted him at the door. "You was glad enough to get here an' rest up from runnin' your tail ragged before a posse, I

recall. Perhaps you've forgotten, ol' pardner, that there's still that little matter of two thousand in blood-money on your head. Plus that unfinished life term at Sundance. I got your whole story, reward dodger an' all. That's my ace-in-the-hole, Rocky. You won't never find it—but neither will any bounty-hunters—provided I keep alive an' healthy.

"Think of the rock-pile they named you after back at prison, Rocky. And think of the gents right here who'd go to hell to try to collect that reward. If I was you, mister, I'd think one hell of a long time before cuttin' my string here. Your best bet to keep on livin' is to set tight an' play 'er plumb safe."

Rocky was silent for a moment. He was licked, he knew. That safety counted so very much. Maybe if he was younger, he'd be willing to take a chance again against a brigade of bounty-hunters and gun-dogs. But now the scarecrow-thin sheriff was desperately tired of being hunted. And for his own reason, he had to stay alive—no matter what the cost. The thin, undying spark of hope that flickered somewhere deep in him told him that. And he must keep beyond the shadows of those gray stone walls.

Durkee's button-bright eyes were like a lizard's, watching a fly on a sunny wall. "Stop off at the bar on your way out," he said. "You sure look like you could stand a drink. An' for God's sake, stick that badge on where a man can see it."

A few minutes later when the Parson looked up again, the barnlike outer room was empty. Heaving to his feet, Durkee closed and locked the roll-top desk and stepped into the bright midmorning glare of the alleyway behind his ramshackle headquarters.

Things were shaping up for the Parson. The half dozen small spread ranchers he had settled in the lower end of the valley were already starting their beef-gather. By agreement, a certain portion of their pooled herd would go to Durkee as rental for the grazing rights of that range. But the Parson knew they'd never take that nice bunch of two-year-olds from the holding ground. A dozen or so of his gunmen—and Rocky Corbett—would see to that.

Durkee chuckled. It would be quite a surprise to those hard-working cowmen, for the fat boss of Perdito had been at some pains to give them a sense of security and peace. The Parson believed in cultivating his own garden and biding his time till the harvest was ready—a red harvest of blood, heartbreak, and gold.

His chins shaking with good humor, the Parson scuffed his way along toward the rear entrance of the Lucky Chance.

ROCKY CORBETT strode stiffly down past the Elite Palace, hang-out for certain of Durkee's gunmen, continued beneath the wooden awning of the Mercantile, which the Parson now owned, and met with equal coldness the stares of the men loafing on the porch of the Perdito House.

A tough bunch to hold in check, he knew. Rebellious in drink, sullen and suspicious when sober, so long as his own gunhand remained what it was, so long as the Parson's shrewd brain plotted enough excitement and raids for them, they could be controlled.

Yet Rocky Corbett knew that sometime their own greed would bring him to meet them over gunsights. The thought came to him, suddenly, that such a thing, too, might be part of Durkee's strategy—keep the wolf-pack busy with petty jealousies and hates, and thus too occupied to strike at their leader.

Corbett noted the absence of the gunnie known as Blister, who claimed to have ridden with Billy the Kid down in Lincoln County. Also, Blister's side-kick, Ygnacio, the 'breed, was missing. Blister, along with his pardner and some others, had

been there long before Rocky Corbett had drifted in, to snag off the sheriff's job. Their resentment at him was like a gun-muzzle pointed at his back.

Hell, he couldn't get nerved up now. He had a job of work on hand, and like all the rest, Rocky Corbett jumped when the Parson pulled the strings. The young drifter was next on the program—to shell out or die, one way or the other. Probably there wouldn't be much trouble about it, for most law-shy gents who hit Perdito on the fast lope were glad enough to pay for the sanctuary the Parson offered.

Unconsciously, Corbett's eyes caught the reflection of the sun on his badge, and he swore softly, recalling the time, some twelve years back, when he'd been mighty proud of the lawman's star. He didn't like to think about those years, but always, like a recurrent dream, they returned to rowel his soul with bitter memories.

His name then had been Corb Rochette—a headstrong, gunswift youngster who had drifted into the Snake River country, in search of excitement and a job. He found both in Lost Fork when he took the part of a dying deputy against a fast-shooting outlaw bunch.

Later, he tamed the wild little cowtown so thoroughly that the marshal's job was his—and also a future—which he regarded chiefly for the sake of the brown-eyed ranch girl he'd married, and for their chubby boy. Life was a pleasant, easy trail stretching ahead. Soon, he thought, he'd resign his lawman's job and start adding to his small, well-stocked range.

THEN, like the small cloud that portends the hurricane, an incident brought the world crashing in chaos about his shoulders. The six-year-old boy, Buck, was riding the range on his grulla pony when the mount became boogered at a rattler. The boy was thrown, trompled and lay unconscious, with a scalp wound and a badly broken left arm.

Corb was in town, his one ranch hand was somewhere out on the range. So Norah, the young wife whom Corb could never think of as being quite grown up, saddled her mare and rode through a driving thunderstorm after the missing boy. She found him, brought him back to the ranch, and then rode to town for Corb and the medico.

Later, Corb himself helped the half-drunken doc try to set the arm, but the job was botched. Young Buck, said the doctor, would go through life with a twisted, stiffened left arm. And then, almost at once, both men were concerned with graver matters.

Norah, having gotten soaked and chilled that day, fell sick of lung fever. The doctor gave her only a fighting chance for life. Corb went for days and nights without sleep or food, and with the help of his one ancient cow hand, managed somehow to keep both his job and the ranch going, and care for his sick wife.

One day, half dead from fatigue and worry, he rode to town for supplies, and to fetch back a bottle. In the saloon, he met his stiff-necked taciturn old rancher neighbor, Ab Bostwick, who unwisely chose that moment to renew a boundary line argument. Spurred on by worry and anger, Corb lifted a few too many over the bar and then the two men, still talking heatedly, adjourned to a back room to thresh out their differences. There, they sent out once for more red-eye.

What happened afterward, Corb never could rightly recall. He did remember struggling back to consciousness from a drunken stupor, then staring from red-rimmed, blurred eyes, only half believing, at the bloodstained, ominously still body of the old rancher lying across the room.

Corb looked down, his head shaking, to find his own gun in his hand. The barrel was fouled by one exploded shell. In the

old man's chest was a hole made by the slug. Shuddering, half sick, Corb remembered with ghastly certainty that Bostwick hadn't been carrying a gun that day. Yet try as he would, he had no recollection of firing that deadly shot.

The world seemed to collapse on Corb's shoulders then. Torn by fear, shaken by the thought that he'd murdered the irascible old cowman, he did a mad thing. Swiftly he blew out the lamp and let himself outside into the darkness. Dazedly he stumbled through the noisy, careless crowd of cowboys and miners, celebrating pay-night, and then mounted and pounded back to his ranch.

There, the second he opened the door, something in the ghostly stillness of the house told him his wife was dying. As he knelt at her bedside, her wan lips smiled forgiveness.

"I knew you'd come back, Corb," she whispered. "You had a tough time, too. Promise me—no matter what happens, you'll take good care of Buck, for now—you'll have to take my place as well as your own. And promise me that you'll always be the man I love—the fine man I married!"

Numbed by grief, he promised, praying silently that the grim posse from town would delay their coming. Nor could he have known then how the haunting memory of that promise would stalk him down the tragic years to follow.

Later, he gently closed the woman's unseeing eyes and held the little boy until he heard his name called from the dooryard. Then, deliberately, he unpinned the badge from his vest and laid it carefully on the table. He walked stiffly to the door, his hands as empty as his heart, his back ramrod-straight.

Corb's last glimpse of his son was when the solemn-eyed youngster was being led from the stuffy little courtroom by some shirt-tail kinfolks of Norah's. Nor could the man ever forget the wistful, questioning, helpless look in the little fellow's eyes.

In Sundance Prison, he met Durkee who was finishing a stretch for stage robbery just as Corb was entering upon serving his life sentence. Ten years of that place, where the only hint of freedom was in the patch of the sky so far above the stone-walled yard. Until there came that night of crashing thunder and whipping rain, when Corb made his desperate gamble for release or for death.

Amid the hoarse alarms of the guards, the banshee wail of the steam siren and the deadly hammer of the Gatling gun from the parapet, the man who had been known as Corb Rochette ran the gauntlet—but not to freedom.

There followed gruelling weeks as a lone-wolf fugitive when he recalled a hint of Durkee's that the Perdito country, in far-off Texas, was a good place for a man to hole up when the law crowded his back-trail. So there Corbett made his devious way, unaware that he was only heading into another kind of prison—a place whose invisible walls would be an even sterner barrier than those he had escaped.

CHAPTER TWO

A Life for a Life!

NOW, glancing at the sun-warped hitch rack of the Lucky Chance, Rocky stopped thinking of those past years. The stranger's Pitchfork gelding was still there, standing hipshot beside a buckboard team, whose rig belonged to the Swede rancher-nester at the head of the valley. Then the sheriff's eyes narrowed. Those two other saddled horses nearby. One belonged to Blister; the other, a line-backed dun, to the breed, Ysidro.

An instinctive inner warning clicked like a .45 hammer inside Rocky's brain. The Parson had given orders to his gun-

dogs to stay clear of the Lucky Chance. The tinhorns, one or two other smooth gents, and the sheriff himself were on the welcoming committee and regularly assigned to meet strangers at that place. But the Parson had shrewdly felt that Blister and the rest of his kind were too rough-handed and enjoyed killing for its own sake too well to fit in there.

Something was wrong here—wrong as hell! Were these two rebellious killers trying to cut in on the Parson's game? And at the same time force a showdown between themselves and Rocky?

Determinedly, Corbett swung in toward the batwings.

It was just at that instant that hell broke loose inside the shadowed interior. The hot midmorning quiet was shattered by the sound of gunfire, the thud of blows and panted curses. And Rocky Corbett hurled himself through the swing doors, dragging his gun.

The scene there—as much as he could see from eyes half blinded by the bright sunlight outside—etched itself on the sheriff's vision in one shuttling glance.

In the center of the room, three struggling men were locked in a deadly, panting embrace. The man in the center was the tow-headed young nester rancher, whose rig had been ouside. Thick-shouldered and long-armed, he was putting up a game battle against the squat Blister and the sinuous Breed, who were trying desperately to break the nester's grasp on their gun wrists.

The sheriff leaped forward, pistol barrel raised to crack down on the nearest gunman, who happened to be Blister. At that moment, however, Blister tore loose from the nester's ham-like hand, and threw up his six-shooter—not at the sheriff, but at the nester, jamming the muzzle in the rancher's ear. The ugly glint of murder gleamed in the gunman's little eyes. Even then Corbett knew in one instinctive flash that, quick as he was, he could never hope to line his own weapon on the killer in time.

It came then—that roar and the thin spurt of flame from a shadowed corner opposite the bar end, just a second before Rocky felt his own gun jump in his hand. It was Blister's gun which dropped from the man's nerveless fist to clatter on the flooring, while his fingers clutched futilely at his thick throat to stop the pulsing blood. Then his heels were beating out an agonized tattoo on the red-stained boards.

Then it was that the sheriff glimpsed the shadowed, slender figure in that far corner, and the glint of light along a leveled Colt barrel.

Shouting to the man to stand his hand, the sheriff hauled Ysidro from the nester. But the breed's gun barrel was already crashing downward. It landed with a sickening crunch on the tow-head's skull. The man dropped without a sound.

Sweeping the breed behind him, Corbett snapped, "It ain't open season on them fellers yet." Then he turned toward the corner.

It was the young cowpuncher who had ridden in a short while ago, all right. And now he was coming slowly forward, in a crouch, the Colt in his white-knuckled hand boring on the sheriff while behind the lawman the breed stood flattened against the wall, hissing like a cat.

SO THIS was the kid whom Corbett had mentally ticketed as being an innocent pilgrim. This gent, who apparently possessed a gun-magic equal to the sheriff's own, was the jigger to whom Corbett had planned to say, "It ain't as easy at it looks, kid. You're just up against something that better men than you have died tryin' to buck. Take it slow, an' you might have a chance to live."

Now a fighting grin split the youngster's homely, square-featured face. "Is

she a shoot-out, lawman?" he asked softly. "Or do we call it a draw, an' I walk outa here with a whole hide?"

Corbett said heavily, "That's up to you, mister. Stick your gun back in leather, an' we'll talk it over."

He hoped the kid didn't notice the rising pulse pounding in his corded throat. He recognized a damn good fighting man when he saw one, did Rocky Corbett, and here one was. But there was something more than that about him, too —a kind of clean-cut recklessness, an honesty that was as obvious as the freckles that peppered the bridge of his stub nose.

The thought flickered across Corbett's mind that he'd have one hell of a time getting this young stranger to hand over his gun, his cash, and his horse and saddle. And now, somehow he hated more than ever the task assigned to him. Not because he was afraid to try his hand against this gun-wise pilgrim, but because . . . Well, damn it, somehow he just cottoned to this gent's style.

Hell, young Buck, his own son, would have been just about the age of this one. Instinctively, the sheriff's eyes searched for that deformity which would signify the broken arm which had never been set right. But it was as straight as anyone else's.

Corbett's lips twisted. He should have known things just didn't happen like that, of course. Likely, he'd never see Buck again. And it was just as well.

The kid's gun hadn't moved, but neither had the sheriff's. Without shifting his gaze from those coldly challenging eyes before him, Corbett said from the side of his mouth, "Git over there, Ysidro, where I can see you. Looks like your new huntin' ground didn't work out so good."

The breed's shuffling footsteps came from behind him, as the cowboy, his eyes still watchful, slowly slid the gun back into his holster.

Corbett nodded in approbation. "That's a smart way to act, kid. And now that—"

Which was just as far as he got.

From a little behind him and slightly to his left, came the whirr of a thrown knife. But the kid was even quicker than the flashing blade. He was crouched, his pine-handled six-shooter tilted and spewing flame. The sheriff heard the deadly hornet hum of a bullet sing past his ear, almost as soon as he heard the solid slap of a slug into flesh and bone.

Ysidro, the breed, screamed once and fell backward through the swinging doors.

IT WAS more than merely good shooting. It was either damned lucky, or here was a miracle-man with a gun. The kid was fast—fast as hell! Grudgingly, the sheriff was forced to admit that, as the haft of Ysidro's thrown knife quivered in the bar, a dozen feet behind the puncher. For an instant the white face of the barman appeared above the pine top, and ducked down again.

The kid's smile wasn't pleasant as Corbett heard the heavy, pain-thick voice of the Swede nester. "You ban come wi' me, faller. Ay get my Colt-gun an' we come back to make planty war, by golly! We show 'em they pick on the wrong faller, this time, when he don't wear no gun, by yimminy! We give 'em one headache so bad like mine." He broke off, lapsing again into unconsciousness.

Just how was the kid mixed up with the nester? Corbett wondered. But the sheriff's eyes never left those of the youngster.

The Pitchfork man's voice was brittle as his gun hammer clicked back. "A hell of a fine, clean game you play in this deadfall town, Sheriff!" he sneered. "Just another tinhorn gun-slammer hidin' behind a badge!"

The sheriff's set, grim face didn't betray the hurt that the kid's scorn made upon him, inside. Maybe it was because the youngster was about the first decent

gent he'd seen in twelve long years. Or because, even in this town, the cowpuncher was still young enough to believe in such things as honesty.

And then Corbett's eyes sharpened on the gun in the kid's hand. The barrel was trembling.

Looked like the kid wasn't the tough hand he'd made himself out to be. But that made him even more dangerous, the sheriff realized. More than ever, an inner compulsion rode Rocky Corbett, demanding that he keep this kid from making the final, fatal play. Maybe somewhere, right this minute, some gent was giving his own kid a square deal.

Little knots of muscle showed at the angles of the puncher's jaws. "Any time you want to start the ball rollin', ol' timer," he suggested in a strained voice. "I'm sorta new at this killin' business, but I'm shore gettin' the hang of it fast. All I want now is a clear space to that door."

Slowly the tense youngster was sidling toward the exit, swinging around so that his back was partially toward the wall.

"Don't be a damn fool, kid," the sheriff said evenly. "You'll never live to ride out after—" He broke off, his eyes shifting to the white-painted window near the swing doors which was opened a bare two inches from the bottom.

The kid, looking at the lawman's eyes peering past his shoulder, grinned mirthlessly. "An old trick, tin-badge! I don't bite on that one."

But that six-shooter muzzle, nosing in the open window, was lined on the kid's back. The sheriff's own gun shifted aim, and at the same instant he let the hammer fall, a roar of another pistol report dinned inside the room. The bushwhacker's sixgun at the same instant he let the hammer fall, a roar of another pistol report dinned inside the room.

The bushwhacker's sixgun spat once even as the kid whirled, his own Colt flaming. A red stain spread down his vest and sleeve, as his bullet smashed out the glass pane. One of the sheriff's two snapped shots took the back-shooter's gun from the window. The other, he knew instinctively, had found its target.

And the kid was standing on widespread feet, his shoulders hunched, his arm dangling loosely, his smoking gun in his good hand, his lips drawn and white. An acrid fog of gunsmoke drifted lazily in the room.

FOR a moment there was only silence, broken by Corbett's strangely heavy breathing. From high on the wall, a chink of 'dobe plaster fell, scattering dust over the dead body of Blister. From outside shouts sounded faintly.

The puncher's eyes were bitter. "Too smart for my own good, eh, lawman? You must figger I'm worth more alive than dead to a bounty-hunter. An' mebbeso you're right, at that. *Quien sabe?* 'Cause you shore ain't savin' my hide outa friendship!"

As he wiped cold sweat from his forehead, Corbett wondered. Why did it seem to matter to him whether this damn young fool lived or died? He's seen 'em come, and he'd seen 'em go.

"I warned you, feller," he reminded the youngster. "Your one chance to stay alive is to shuck that gun an' play pretty."

Boot heels sounded on the wooden porch.

That likely would be some of the Parson's bunch coming to see what the hell had happened. And the thought flashed into the sheriff's mind that he had to play it close to his chest if he wanted to help this kid. The cowboy would have to be taken to jail, and then, somehow, Corbett would have to see that he broke out—with a good horse and a gun, and grub. Which, considering that the Parson used gundogs of Blister's type to guard the juzgado, wasn't nearly as easy as it might at first

seem. Those gents weren't taking any funny-sounding orders from Sheriff Rocky Corbett. The Parson was the only boss they recognized.

A couple of men stuck their heads inside the doors. The first man had his gun drawn, leveled on the kid's back. Tough faces peered over his shoulder.

"Looks like the breed didn't call his shots when he tried to shoot through the window," the first man said. "Need any help, Sheriff?" His whiskered grin bore no friendliness. Then his jaw sagged as his shifty eyes caught sight of Blister's body on the floor and the Swede, the dried blood from his scalp staining his face as he sat braced against the wall.

The sheriff's gun was still on the kid. "Everything's under control, boys," he said easily. "Just a pilgrim that didn't seem to know our rules—which turned out to be too bad for both the Breed an' Blister, here. All right, you!" He turned to the kid, his voice suddenly gruff.

"Drop your cutter—slow!"

The kid's gun hit the floor. The sheriff snapped the steel cuffs about the youngster's wrists, locking them behind his back. In the kid's eyes, as they stared at the lawman, flamed a mixture of defiance and contempt.

"I got a hunch my number ain't up yet," he said between pain-clenched teeth. "An' my hunches always come out right—which'll be your tough luck!"

To cover that strange lump that rose in his throat, Corbett snarled, "Perdito's law says a life for a life, an' it's your turn to ante. Your cell has a nice view of the gallows. Git goin'!"

CHAPTER THREE

Brand New Gunman for Perdito

THE Pitchfork man speared a bitter look at the half-conscious nester, as they started to push through the swing doors. "I shore made two damn fool mistakes," he muttered. "One was sailin' in to save that clodhopper's thick hide from your two drunk gun-dawgs. The other was thinkin' you might play square, just because you sport a tin badge on your vest. Probably it'll be a lesson to me, after I'm dancin' on air. Unless you favor a ten-pace start an' a bullet in the back—which is more than likely."

Corbett gestured with his head for the Parson's men to clear a path, and with the shuffling of feet, he didn't hear the door open in the rear of the room. Nor did he see the look of astonishment on the face of the bald-headed little barkeep, who, having come up for air, now was turned toward that private door.

Then at the sound of that familiar wheezing voice, Corbett whirled, his hand still on the kid's good arm.

"Sheriff, haul that young feller back here, right now." It was Durkee, and he was laughing in bubbling good-humor. "We got to show better hospitality than that to the pilgrim in our midst. An' take off them bracelets!"

The sheriff's jaw froze as they stepped toward the balloon-like form of the Parson.

Rocky Corbett's mind had already been made up to keep the kid from kicking out his life on the gallows. But in the Parson's opaque shiny eyes, he read a new menace to the youngster. Durkee, whatever his game was, planned to use him. And that was worse than slow death, for—provided the kid didn't call for a quick showdown—all his pride, honesty and courage would die first. After that . . . Well, what was there after that worth living for?

The sheriff, with the sullen youngster before him, followed Durkee down the passageway and turned off into his private room.

Durkee turned, his fat, florid face still beaming. "Set, kid. You, too Sheriff." He indicated chairs, after settling himself

into the largest. "Seen the whole play from what I call my private box," he chortled, indicating a peephole fitted with a swinging slot in the wall. "An' I don't mind say', young feller, that I'd off made the same try myself if I'd of been in your boots."

The kid said nothing.

"Too much gun-savvy," put in Corbett, purposely hard-voiced. "Now he's got a couple more graves to dig, besides his own."

"He's too good to waste his talents on shovel work," said the Parson. "Besides, Blister an' that knife-slingin' breed compadre of his made the mistake of gettin' drunk this mornin' an' forgettin' the orders I give 'em to leave the nesters alone. How's that arm, kid? Lucky you're a right-hander."

"It ain't nothin'," said the kid, his eyes hard and cold. "Gimme some whiskey to douse it with, an' I'll fix 'er up with a eatin'-tobacco poultice."

The Parson hauled out a quart of Sunnybrook from his bottom drawer. "This here's strictly drinkin' likker, kid," he said. "You fix him up, Rocky."

From a set of open shelves near the desk, the sheriff took cotton, a roll of gauze bandages and a bottle of iodine.

"Easier on the whiskey supply, for bullet punctures," smiled the Parson complacently. "An' mebbe it's just as good. Here's how."

He and the kid tossed off their drinks. Durkee left the office while the gray-faced sheriff cut away the kid's shirt at the shoulder. The sheriff frowned as his stubby fingers fumbled at the bandage. He was fighting blind now, riding along with the Parson until the sign was right for him to make his play. For what?

For a drifting young cow-punch who hated him for what he was—a broken man who had sold himself, branded with the black mark of a scheming gun-boss. Damned if he knew why he was taking cards in such a hopeless, deadly game for the sake of a plumb stranger. But it was as if something stronger than himself was directing his purpose.

THE pages of the years leafed back before his faded eyes. Again he saw himself, a reckless, swaggering youngster, ready for a laugh or a fight. He sure wouldn't have held anything but contempt for the kind of gent he was now. And likely Buck, his son—if the boy was still alive—would hold the same opinion.

The sheriff shook off those memories and set again to his task, his gaze unconsciously following the line of the kid's bared arm. And suddenly it seemed that a dozen alarm bells were clamoring inside his brain. There was something damn funny about the kid's elbow—his left elbow. For inside, right at the joint, was a jagged, irregular white scar. And near it another!

But it was the first one that caught Rocky Corbett's attention. And again, for a flash, the pendulum of time swung back. Once more he was standing over a six-year-old boy who manfully bit back the tears, while the blasting storm flickered the yellow lamp flame inside the ranch room. On the other side of the kid stood the doc, raising his crimson-stained lancet.

"Damn compound fracture," the doc had cussed. "Ain't ever tried to fix one up before, and I'm worried about those jagged bone ends. Had to cut away some of 'em. Young Buck's going to have a left wing that'll be some shorter an' I'll sew 'er up, then we'll splint 'er. My best wasn't good enough for this job, Corb. But it ain't like he'd lost the use of that arm. You savvy that, don't you, Corb?"

Corb himself had dressed the wound that last night which had sent him down the road to Perdito—and to hell. How could he ever forget the shape of that scar which would—as he believed—handi-

cap his own boy for the rest of his days?

The kid swore then, his jaws clamped tight. "You sure are trompin' on my sore side, feller! A damn pony's hoof started it when I was a button. Made my arm look like a snake track. Got a slug in it some years later, an' a smart doc straightened the whole thing up pretty.

"Then that greaser this mornin'—taggin' me through the window—on the same shoulder! Mebbe if I pin a target on my other side, they'll try that, instead. Hell, it must be this brand of likker that's waggin' my tongue. Or maybeso you poured the iodine in the wrong bottle."

A drop of sweat made a crooked, glistening path down the sheriff's gray cheek. With an effort he kept his jaws locked as a dozen questions crowded his mind. But of the one thing he was certain. This was Buck, his kid. Here. Alive.

Why had Buck ridden down here? Well, why had he himself come down, into this deadfall town where Parson Durkee held the threads of a hundred lives in his greedy fingers? Instinctively then, Corbett knew that above all else, he must keep knowledge of their relationship from the Parson; prevent him from playing them off, one against the other.

He was positive the kid hadn't recognized him. Twelve years ago, Buck was six, and Rocky himself had changed. His raven black hair was now a stringy gray. His once straight shoulders were stooped with the burden of his own tragedy. And more than that, an inner fire of confidence and pride had guttered out within him. No. He was safe enough.

Parson Durkee returned, stood teetering on his toes and heels, his thumbs hooked in his vest armholes, studying the kid judicially.

"You wouldn't, by any chance, be packin' a law badge on you, would you, fellow?" he asked calmly.

Buck's eyes were challenging. "I rode down here on my own personal, private business, which ain't lawin', by any means. An' since you seem to admit that both of them two gun-dogs were overripe for a killin', it don't seem that I committed much of a crime. Now I'll be ridin' on, if it's all the same to you. You got a hell of a town here, mister, an' a hell of a sheriff. An' I ain't sure that you smell much sweeter to me."

THE Parson nodded, applying a match flame to his thin, light-colored cheroot. "Good colts come plenty salty," he said approvingly. "Long time since I seen the Pitchfork brand on a horse. If you know that outfit, mebbe you can tell me if ol' Jaybird O'Brien's still tryin' to make it the hardest-worked spread in Wyoming?"

"I know that spread, mister," drawled the kid, a one-sided grin on his tanned jaw. "Only, when I last saw it, it was in Montana. Always had been, an' showed signs of stayin' put. Jaybird O'Brien, bein' roundup cook, don't have much to say about whether the hands work hard or not, an' I wasn't cookee up there. Anything more?"

"Yeah." Durkee's eyes glittered with cold humor. "You know much about the rearin' an' general care of nesters?"

"I never made no close study of that breed," admitted the kid dryly, "exceptin' over the sights of a Winchester up in Wyomin' a few years back. I found I'd picked the wrong side takin' up for the big ranchers in the Johnson County War. Maybe that's why I sorta figgered to copper my bet out in the bar, a few minutes ago." He shook his head. "Played 'em wrong again."

"That ruckus in Wyomin' left me with a few nesters' bullets in me, mister. So I don't hold no fond recollection of farmers, fencers an' two-bit cowmen. Added to which, those same rangepests may account for my headin' light an' fast down into this country where the only green grass is buried under miles of

malpai. The rest of it is that I can make a fair hand with cows, don't get piled from a horse no more than the average, an' the last time I answered to any name it was Buck Willis. If that tells you what you want to know, I'll—"

Parson Durkee held up one fat-fingered hand. "Son," he rumbled, "I think I can use a gent who knows how to use both his brains an' his gun. Mebbe a hundred dollars a month, with grub an' shells throwed in, would make you change your mind about ridin' on so sudden. If it's money, excitement, an' good likker you like—"

He let his thick voice fade, glancing sideways at the sheriff. "There might be a nice future in a town like this for a young feller who played his cards right," he suggested. "Sometimes a man's gun hand gets a mite rusty with age, an' when he steps out, why, there's a real good job waitin' to be filled. You never can tell. Well, how about it?"

Rocky Corbett's anxious gaze was fixed on Buck. So this was the Parson's game. And he couldn't have baited his trap better to snare a wild, gun-handy youngster than by offering the lure of a reckless life and easy money. But this, as Corbett well knew, was an ordinary job as gun hand where the issue could be fought out squarely, man to man.

Right now, in the next second, the boy's future and all his hope of ever knowing a decent, honest life hung in the balance. For whatever had sent Buck down here, there was always the chance that he might still square his debt with the law that wanted him. That done, he could face the world and tell it to go to hell. It wouldn't be easy, but it would be worth it. And Corbett swore that somehow his boy would have that chance.

A few months here would mark him with a tragic, crimson brand too deep to blot. Corbett had seen some of the picked young recruits ride out, under the leadership of one of Durkee's killers, headed, as the youngsters believed, on a legitimate gun mission. But they had returned with the blood of honest men on their hands, cursed and hunted like fanged lobos by the decent, God-fearing cowmen whom—such a pathetically short while ago—they had called friends. The Parson had smiled. And sent them out to raid again.

All this Rocky Corbett knew as his knuckles ridged white on the back of the chair.

"Well, Buck Willis?" the Parson asked again.

Every nerve in the sheriff seemed to cry out to the kid to read correctly those beady black eyes.

Buck said, "A hundred a month an' shells is good money. An' dinero talks in this business. Mister, I take it you're the one who gives the orders, so show me my first chore."

The Parson beamed up at the sheriff. "I told you this kid was smart," he said.

But Rocky Corbett felt suddenly sick and impotent, as a man would who watched a destroying avalanche sweep down on someone he loved, knowing he was powerless to help. He wanted to shout a warning to Buck. He wanted to slap him with a gun barrel and drag him away. And most of all, he wanted to send a lead slug into the fat paunch of the Perdito boss before him.

He did none of these things.

It wouldn't help Buck if he killed Durkee. Even if he managed to ride out safely against the Parson's gun crew, he'd be hunted both by them and the law.

And, as a renegade, the best that Rocky could bring Buck would be the grief and disgrace of a blackened name. At worst, he'd drag the youngster down to his own level, shunned by honest men, cut off forever from the eventual peace of a ranch home, the comfort of a family.

Corbett was wise enough to know that it took more than the mere fact of blood

relationship to change the feeling of contempt and hatred that Buck so clearly showed toward him. Knowing the sheriff was his father would naturally make Buck hate him the more. Well, he had reason enough, God knew, and that thought was a searing iron in Rocky's heart.

Hell, he'd look fine—trying to tell the kid how to walk.

The youngster's bleak glance swept the sheriff then rested on the Parson. "I'm sorta needin' a new shirt, an' a few more shells," he said. "An'—I'm waitin' for that job."

Then, when Rocky Corbett saw the tough, go-to-hell look in his son's eyes, and watched the faint, fighting grin twist his thin lips . . .

And then he knew what hell really meant.

THE JOB, however, didn't materialize for the next two days—each minute of which was purgatory for the sheriff. At first he believed he might talk to Buck, tell him a few simple facts about the Parson and his way of doing business. But there were two things and two things only which prevented that.

Buck, obviously, wasn't the kind of gent who would relish any intrusive suggestions. Headstrong as his dad had once been, sure of himself and trigger-wise, he'd figure that he'd been through the mill. That was clear in his increasing swagger as the wound in his left shoulder mended; it was noticeable also in his hard-bitten attitude before the rest of the Parson's tough-handed gunmen. Something about him seemed to emanate a warning for all men to keep away. A warning which was respected. He remained close-mouthed, as tough a wolf as any of them—but a man who walked always by himself.

The second—and more important—reason was that Rocky Corbett didn't get the chance to talk to him. Buck was at no pains to hide just what place the sheriff took in his scheme of things. The kid seemed to make a point of avoiding him, and when Rocky offered to buy him a drink, the kid tersely refused. Without thanks.

It was against all range etiquette, a dangerous lapse which was almost a tacit challenge to a gun duel. Corbett was helpless to take it up, and naturally the kid misread the sheriff's motive for letting the insult pass. Rocky could read that in the half-veiled contempt in the youngster's arrogant glance.

"Yellow!" the kid's attitude shouted, more damning than the word itself.

The last time it happened, Corbett, seething in his own helplessness, suddenly straightened. It was as if a mist had suddenly been whipped from before his vision. By God, maybe the kid was right! For the first time in his life, the thought struck him with the heavy force of bolt-lightning.

He had failed both Norah and the boy—and had let the damning sense of that shame whip him down into the beaten, broken man he was. He'd been afraid to return to prison, to clean his slate and square the bloody debt he owed, once and for all.

An idea began to take form in his mind then. It would mean the end of the trail for him, but he'd run his own race long ago. Buck was the important thing—he was the only one that counted now. He'd have to wait a little while to draw openers in the desperate game he had in mind, but he knew he'd drew them. And soon.

And Rocky Corbett, for the first time in years, made a sound suspiciously like a chuckle. For if things worked out as he was sure they would, then the Parson himself would be helping him—without knowing it.

And the next evening, at sunset, he got his chance.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Parson Plays His Hand

THE PARSON looked up when, in response to the summons, Corbett slouched into the bare little office. As before, a sheet of paper covered with neat figures was spread on the desk before him, but Durkee's usually placid face was dark, his fat lips sullen.

"By God!" Durkee swore, in the injured, angry tone of a cowman, who had just discovered his only son was walking sheep for a living, "they—they done it, Rocky! Done it to me, who befriended 'em, who brought 'em in here half-starving, gave 'em grub, all but handed over the richest range in the county!" His fist thumped softly on the desk top.

And Rocky Corbett suppressed a grin at the sound of a sob in the gun-boss's throat. It was good acting, he had to admit, as he listened to the Parson's version of the nesters' duplicity. How they had agreed to let Durkee cut a certain percentage of the herd, but now—said the Parson in self-righteous indignation—the whole two thousand head of prime beef cattle were being held on the west ranch, ready to start the drive. And he hadn't even been notified.

Every hog had to look after his own bacon in this world, but it was damn hard, after all the trouble he'd gone to for them sodbusters. After all the kindness he'd showed them.

"We're shoving the herd off there tonight," went on Durkee, forgetting for the moment his role of wronged benefactor. "I know damn well they ain't gun-guarded. Why should they be? Ain't I been hand-raisin' the nesters for just this very thing?

"Rocky, round up Sorbey, Cramm and the rest that hangs out at the Elite Palace. Get 'em ready to push those longhorns pronto. While Buck rides up first an' argues with whoever's night-hawkin' the herd—since he sided the Swede at the Lucky Chance, they ain't likely to suspect him—the rest can work around and take care of any others. It ought to be a slick, easy job, with no trouble. But if you got to shoot, shoot for keeps. I'll know if things ain't goin' right, an' I'll be down with the rest of the bunch. If that happens, we want to make damn sure that there ain't one of them nesters left alive. I made that mistake once, and don't aim to be caught again.

"I'm lettin' Buck act as trail boss to Red River Crossin'. The buyer's crew'll meet 'em there in two weeks to take 'em on up north. It's as far as we go—cash on the barrel-head at the Crossin'. Get going!"

Corbett left, his wan face masking a mixture of hope and excitement he scarcely dared think about.

HE FOUND Buck in the Blue Light Bar, and he too seemed infected with the undercurrent of tension fermenting in the town. As the boy looked up when the sheriff came through the swinging doors, Rocky noted that something of the kid's hard arrogance and surly contempt had dropped from him. Yet, when Corbett gave him a second glance, the kid's face was as hawk-like and recklessly bitter as ever.

Corbett motioned Buck over to a far table.

"It's the job, eh?" asked the youngster, grinning bleakly.

It took only a minute for Corbett to explain to the kid his part in the planned raid. "Keep the night-hawks busy talkin'," he said, "till the rest of our boys have a chance to ride up. That should be about fifteen-twenty minutes after you get there." He gave the youngster trail directions to the west bench, where the herd was being held—but nothing in the sheriff's face or voice betrayed the fact that

he was outlining a strangely roundabout route for Buck to take.

He was just shoving through the doors, about to head for the Elite Palace to give orders to the others, when he turned, hearing Buck call his name. The kid was lolling back in his black, crisp hair.

"Better have one on me, Sheriff, before I ride. Sort of a last drink."

Corbett's heart gave an extra beat. "A—a last drink?" he raised his gray eyebrows. "I don't get you, kid."

Buck shrugged carelessly. "You can never tell when it's your last drink in this business, is all," he passed off his remark. "Like in bronc-snapping, savvy? There's most always come a time when you climb abroad a fuzz-tail that don't look no different from a thousand others you've rode. But he is, plenty. You never know—until you wake up either in some cow-town hospital, or mebbe you don't wake up at all. It's a mighty long trail to Red River Crossing—an' back again."

Puzzled, vaguely perturbed, the sheriff looked at his son. Then it came, like the concussion of a scattergun blast in a closed room.

"Ever hear of a gent named Rochette—Corb Rochette—around this country, Sheriff?"

The kid's eyes were as bleak, as unreadable as before. Rocky Corbett frowned, rubbed his bony jaw—and took a long chance.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Seemed like there was a gent who called himself that, who drifted down thisaway a couple years back. Why, kid?"

Buck shrugged again, the brown-paper cigarette dangling from his lips sending up its ribbon of blue like signal smoke. "I was lookin' for him, is all."

Rocky Corbett's eyes as he studied the cracks of the plaster ceiling. "Some younger than me, Corb was," he said reflectively. "I was a purty good friend of his at one time. He cashed in his chips somewhere in the malpai, between here an' the Border. There wasn't much left of him by the time I got there, kid. A friend of yours, mebbe?"

Now it was Buck's turn to look away. "I wouldn't call him exactly that," he said, and was silent. Then, more to himself than the sheriff: "Well, mebbe it's best thataway."

The sheriff had a hard time breathing against the pounding in his chest. The kid's cigarette was out, but he still let the wheatstraw dangle from his lips. Suddenly, he spat it out, his lean jaw tightened, his fists clenched as he started directly at Rocky.

"Corb Rochette—he was my dad, see?" he bit out between clenched teeth. "It don't signify a damn what they say about him, but he was aces, so far as I'm concerned." The tension suddenly went out of him. "I just wanted to find out a few things, but I reckon I was too late."

Abruptly his chair legs made a harsh scraping sound on the rough flooring as he got to his feet. "Well, here's mud in your eye, Sheriff!" He tossed the liquor down in a gulp, turned and dragged his spurs toward the door.

The sheriff stared after him, his face haggard. Once he opened his mouth, as if to call back the youngster, then clamped it shut. Slowly he got to his feet, leaving the filled glass untouched on the table.

As he made his way out of the Blue Light his fist was clenched tight about the steel handcuffs in his pocket.

IT DIDN'T take long to do business at the Elite Palace. Then, after he watched Sorbey, Cramm and the others of the raiding trail crew ride from town in the wake of the kid, he got his horse saddled, checked the loads in his .45 and carbine, and rode out at a running walk.

Well out of sight of town, the sheriff turned his big gray from the trail and headed off into the narrow, brush-lined

path, making a steep ascent over a rock-strewn rise. Above him the stars wheeled close. Behind, the lights of Perdito twinkled like fireflies, then winked out, one by one. His ears attuned for the sound of shots from the west bench, he spurred on—but in a direction which would intercept the trail he'd told Buck to take.

When he came out into that wider wagon-rutted road, his gun was in his right hand, his lined face glistening with sweat. He waited a little off the trail, for the sound of hoofbeats which would tell him his son was coming. His pulse beat was loud in his ears.

That was the hardest thing he'd yet done—let the kid walk out like that back in the Blue Light saloon. But something yet harder lay ahead of him.

That would come when he'd ride out on the kid, his gun-barrel slicing down in a vicious arc against Buck's temple. That's when the handcuffs and the piggin' strings he carried would come in handy. But after that, there'd be nothing more to fear.

It would take them two or three weeks—he'd figured it out many times—hard riding to get back to Wyoming, where he supposed the kid was wanted. Rocky had already heard that most men embroiled in that bloody conflict had been granted amnesty by the governor. He reckoned that Buck wasn't wanted for more than that. But he'd have a chance to find that out before they got that far.

He couldn't let Buck make the fool runaway play he had made. The kid must take his medicine. And then, later, he himself would show up back at the warden's office at Sundance. There was a chance that—with good behavior and luck—he'd be free again. To join Buck, with both their backtrails clear forever.

Suddenly the sheriff came alert at the distant pound of hoofbeats. But they turned off before they came closer, and Corbett, troubled, peered through the heavy scrub growth along the roadside.

His jaw dropped. It was Buck, all right. But instead of following the trail as Rocky had directed him, he had cut to the left, and was now pounding at right angles away from the spot where Rocky sat his horse. It was also in the opposite direction from where the nesters' herd was held.

The sheriff followed, holding to the pace, but careful to keep out of sight, should Buck look back. One mile passed swiftly. Two miles. And then Rocky flung himself from the saddle with a stifled oath of astonishment, hunkering down in the brush, holding the gray's reins in one hand.

For a log ranch house lay directly ahead, little cracks of light showing behind blanketed windows. And the sheriff recognized that sod-roofed little log house as belonging to the Swede, leader of the bunch the Parson had marked for destruction.

BOLDLY the kid rode into the door-yard, letting out a shrill whistle. Light showed for an instant as the door opened a crack, then it was dark again. There was a cautious, low-pitched word or two which the sheriff couldn't hear, and then Buck was leading his horse around toward the barn at the rear.

Was the kid trying to outsmart the Parson by playing both ends against the middle—grabbing the herd for himself, with the help of the Swede? Or—?

Suddenly Rocky Corbett's heart gave a great bound. By God, Buck was playing 'er straight! He was doing the thing that Corbett himself had always wanted to do, if those twin threatening shadows of prison and the Parson hadn't been haunting his nights and days.

He raised a joyous yell. "Hey, kid—Buck! Light up! It's me—Rocky Corbett!"

The door opened. In the shadowed

enclosure, Corbett made out the slender form of the youngster. The kid's hand flipped up, flame spurted from Buck's gun, and Corbett felt himself whirled half way around, with the impact of a slug against his ribs.

The kid's voice came then: "So you trailed me, eh, Sheriff? There's a little present to take back to your crooked boss—with the compliments of the Last Hope Cattle Pool. Tell him I got most of the information I come after—even though the play the Swede and I rigged up didn't come off the way we'd planned it in the Lucky Chance."

Rocky Corbett had dropped the gray's reins, and his gun was in his hands now. Useless, as he knew it would be against the kid—his kid, and one to be proud of.

He started walking forward slowly, his eyes implacable on the figure that still stood in the darkened doorway. And somehow he couldn't talk around the lump in his throat.

"Far enough, Sheriff!" Buck's cold warning came again. "I sorta twisted that autobiography I gave Durkee in his office. I was in the Johnson County ruckus, all right, but I picked the small fellers' side. Sort of a habit of mine. I knew the Swede up there, an' he wrote me that he and his partners had settled down here, an' that they were bein' used as bait by a fat-gutted renegade. The Swede an' me fixed up that meeting in the saloon, but those two would-be tough hands took the play away from us. I had to do some tall talkin' to make it sound right."

It was only then that Corbett found his voice. "Kid—Buck—" he called brokenly. "It's your dad—Corb Rochette. I gotta see you, kid!"

His answer was the youngster's harsh laugh. "Too thin, feller. You told me yourself that Rochette died in the malpai, two years back. I checked at Sundance Prison and found he made his break before that time. Don't try comin' any nearer, or—"

But the man who had been Corb Rochette had something mighty important to say. "Buck, remember your little grulla pony, the one called Deputy, 'cause you said its hair was always gettin' in its eyes, like Deputy Joe Blake? The one that throwed you in the rain when you busted your arm? Remember the hidden cave we discovered back at Lost Fork, Idaho? Before your Uncle Pat taken you to live with him on Papoose Crick? Recall how I held you the night Norah died, Buck?"

But he couldn't see his boy's face, but the voice told him everything he wanted to know. "Dad! An' I been lookin' all these years!"

And then Corb Rochette was stumbling blindly forward, his gun holstered, his arms outstretched in the darkness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Legion of the Damned

LATER, inside the log cabin, the Swede heard part of the story and he cussed some and hoorawed the sheriff for not being more neighbor-like with his own kind—even if they were only a bunch of dumb Swedes.

But Mrs. Sorensen, gingham-clad, apple-cheeked wife of the nester, looked a little worried after she'd heard about the raid. She busied herself with cleansing and doctoring the bullet furrow in Corb's side.

"Durkee's set for a wipe-out," Corb said grimly. "He's holdin' about half his gunmen in reserve. Ole," he turned to the Swede, "get your missus to the strongest cabin in the valley, along with the other women, kids an' old men. Get a couple of good men to guard 'em, an' we'll do our damndest at the holding ground."

Mrs. Sorensen's capable hand grasped

a carbine. "If you and Ole and the rest are risking your lives for our stock, I'm staying here," she announced calmly. "We built this place with our hands, Corb. I've fought before alongside my man for what's ours. I'm ready to do it again."

"Now, Maw," began Ole Sorensen.

He was suddenly silenced by Corb's upraised hand. "Listen!" he breathed.

Into the room's stillness came the sharp distant spatter of gunfire.

"By Yimminy!" exclaimed the Swede. "Already they yump us, yah? But we fool that Parson feller. We had six good fighting men all the time watching the herd. The Parson gets his cut of the cows, sure. But we watch, yust the same. Like a lynx, only more so, hey?"

"Come on," Buck said tensely. "Time for us to ride. Ole, you get Bill Sackett, the Ramey brothers and the rest of your neighbors. Corb, you an' me go together. Grab your guns, boys. The Lost Hope Pool's goin' to war!"

Mrs. Sorensen's anxious blue gaze was on her husband as she swiftly packed salaratus biscuits and cold jerkey into three small bundles. Her eyes were strangely bright as she kissed the three of them.

They rode then, the Swede siding them for a time until he swerved off to collect the other valley nesters. "See you in the smoke, feller!" he shouted.

There was little time for talk above the rapid pounding of their horses' hoofs, above the increasing crackle of the guns as Corb and Buck spurred upward toward the bench. The kid levered a shell into his carbine chamber, and Corb spurred up at his stirrup.

The long weight of bitterness and fear seemed to have dropped from the sheriff's thin shoulders, leaving them squared, ready at last to meet the world face to face. He was no longer young, but now he had a worthy cause to fight for, beside Buck—and honest ranchers who were glad to call him neighbor. It made him feel young.

Suddenly the youngster leaned over in his saddle, holding out his hand. Something bright glittered in his palm. "Your old badge, Corb," he cried. "Remember the night you took it off and laid it on the table back home? I picked it up then, an' never let it get away from me. Here you are, feller!"

Corb grinned in the darkness. "An' here's where I win back the right to wear it, son!" he shouted and ripped from his vest the Parson's nickeled emblem of misrule.

It glinted in the starlight as it sailed from his hand. Then he said, his voice husky, "Kid, I'm cuttin' my string back in town. I sure hope you'll want to ride out with me, 'cause I got sort of a plan in mind. Somethin' that'll mean a lot to both of us, the rest of our lives, Buck—" He broke off.

AHEAD, and almost on a level with them now, the darkness was giving way to the first gray streaks of dawn. From the center of the level benchland little puffs of smoke spurted from the few nester guards sheltered behind brush and rocks. And even as he watched, those smoke-puffs seemed to grow less.

"Where's the herd?" Corb cried.

"Safe, hidden in one of the draws," Buck called back. "God, why don't the Swede an' the rest come?"

They pounded on, Corb taking the lead, swinging in a circle so as to come upon the attackers from the rear. "We can hold 'em until—" But he didn't finish. Suddenly he saw one man drop back, and then mount his horse.

"Kid," Corb called, pointing at the man, "if that rider gets to Perdito, it means the end of the nesters. He'll bring the Parson an' his bunch. Listen, feller: Swing back so as to come up on the guards' side. If you got time, for Lord's sake, stampede that herd. Scatter 'em to hell an' gone

down the valley, even if you lose about a third of 'em. Me, I'm goin' to see that gent doesn't get to the Parson. He an' his bunch have only one route to ride down here—through the pass. I'm tryin' to earn the right to wear my old badge again. An' if I don't see you again, that was the best last drink I ever had. You're aces with me, feller. Always!"

Corb Rochette was grinning as he waved to his son and wheeled his horse, trying to overtake the messenger that was to bring death to the nesters, destruction to their homes and families. He was grinning, even though tears ran unashamed down his weathered cheeks.

Corb's spurs rammed the flanks of his heaving horse as he bent low over the mount's neck, trying to work an extra ounce of energy and speed from that stout-hearted gray. But the animal had given his best on the heartbreaking ride up the trail to the bench. Recklessly Corb rode down the steep trail taking every means he knew to shorten the distance between himself and the rider.

Once the rider—Corb recognized him as Cramm, the lath-thin gunman from the Elite—turned and glanced behind, then urged his horse to more speed, twisting and snapping a couple of shots from his six-shooter which fell short.

Corb drew his saddle gun from its sheath under the fender and tried for a shot. It would be luck, he knew, if his bullets did any good from the heaving, unsteady back of the laboring horse. The butt-plate kicked against his shoulder and he levered in another, trying for the horse. But already his mount was dropping behind. He was too late.

Yet—was he? For even as he saw Cramm turn in the saddle and wave a derisive hand, disdaining even to use his gun at that increased distance, Corb's jaws tightened grimly.

What was it he'd said back there? "Here's where I win the right to wear this badge!" Well, there was just one way to do it.

Voluntarily he slowed to save his horse. No need for hurry now, for already he was in the pass, with its sheer rock sides stretching up toward the blue. This was the way that the Parson must lead out his reserve bunch of gun-dogs toward the nesters. They'd be waiting and ready to ride when Cramm rode in.

Every second he could hold them off would give the Swede's bunch time to get to the bench. Every second brought Corb Rochette closer to Perdito, with the first rays of the sun glinting bravely on the badge he was now proud to wear, and to die for.

For a second he thought of stopping at a point where the rocks jutted into the trail, and waiting for the Parson's gun-hung cavalcade. But the closer to town he could stop them, the more chance the nesters would have. And somehow he knew that he'd get the Parson. He couldn't die until he'd sent lead slugs smashing into the scheming, murderous gun-boss.

But now, in the red morning he caught the glimpse of Perdito in the distance.

THOUGH it was big daylight, lights still burned in the Lucky Chance. The sound of raucous drunken voices came from its doors—laughter, oaths, boasts. Rocky Corbett, having slipped from the saddle before the livery barn and tersely ordered the sleepy-eyed hostler to rub down his horse and double-grain him, slipped around into the rear entrance of the Linday Chance.

Walking softly, his gun butt clenched in his cold, sweating palm, he made his way stealthily down the corridor. The doors to the private rooms were ajar, the rooms quite empty. Cautiously he walked ahead toward the main room. And very slowly, he pushed open the door and slid inside, his back to the wall, his old

badge pinned prominently on his vest.

For a moment his eyes blinked at the thick cloud of tobacco smoke, at the thick, close air. But he couldn't miss that fat figure standing on the bar, between two equally huge liquor barrels, from which the drunken, roistering gunmen were helping themselves from tin cups.

"Last drink time, boys, before we start to bring the fear of God to them nesters," the Parson's voice boomed. As usual, he was smiling, quite sober, his beady eyes glittering in anticipation. "There's the extry cattle, which you shore have a stake in. And—" his voice lowered—"I'm told there's some mighty purty-lookin' nester gals down there, too. When we torch their shacks—"

And there was Cramm, the messenger standing proudly below the Parson, helping himself from the spigot of one of the barrels.

Corb's gun was loose in his hand. He said in a low voice, "Parson."

The Parson's eyes shifted, then narrowed on that thin face. "Hello, Sheriff. Nice of you to come in. Too bad, though, that Cramm recognized you tryin' to stop him. I should have realized that there's enough snake blood in you to make a crawl. An' before you die, you'll do just that. Have at him, boys!"

Corb's one gun, held low close to his hip, was steady on the Parson's paunch. Men turned to see him there, and then, miraculously, he had a gun in the other hand, and the gunman nearest him was cursing a suddenly lightened holster.

Then someone started the ball rolling.

IT CAME with the explosion of a gun, held by a half-drunken staggering renegade from across the room, who had gotten a glimpse of Corb. But it was no more than a glimpse, and another of the Parson's crew inadvertently got in the way of the shot. He went down fast.

And Rocky was crouched against the wall thumbing his gun-hammers, and making every slug count, while a fusillade of lead bit chunks from the 'dobe wall around him, while the Parson, crouched behind the high liquor barrel, shouted to his gunnies to beef the double-crossing snake.

Men died there, that red morning in the Lucky Chance, just as they'd died a few hours before on the west bench holding-ground. Corb felt the sickening shock of slugs smash into him. Once he staggered, recovered himself, and made for the shelter of the bar end, where, fumbling and bloody-handed, he made a slow job of reloading his gun.

He was down from a leg that felt as if it had been suddenly plunged into boiling water. Like a wounded animal, snarling, laughing and sobbing in berserk rage, he braced his back against the wall, daring them to come on and kill him.

Suddenly the conviction flashed across Corb's mind that it wasn't in the cards for him to die here, that what he was doing, mad and unreasonable though it was, was keeping the Perdito raiders from destroying the nesters, merely because they wanted to see him die before they left. For surely, if any one could keep a spark of life in himself with such a purpose, Corb could.

He shook his head, trying to focus on Cramm, who was attempting clumsily to creep around to one side—and there was the Parson, still alive also. The Parson had that reward dodger, which he'd said was safe—so long as he stayed alive and healthy.

Corb's thin lips split in a cold grin that was more than a snarl. A hell of a lot of good that dodger would do either of them now. Then, with agonizing slowness, Corb raised the hammer, trying to hold the wavering, hot gun muzzle on Cramm. He let it fall.

Cramm staggered and fell.

A curtain of red flooded Corbett's eyes,

and he tried to shake it off for just another shot. But he was tired and the gun in his hand was sagging. He tried twice to lift it, to shoot blindly, and once more, numbly, he felt the butt buck in his palm.

He was through, now. But anyhow, he'd made his mark in Perdito, he had given the Swede and the rest of the boys a chance to meet the renegades.

He slipped down into a comforting, effortless vortex of darkness which swirled up to meet him. And then there wasn't even pain.

CORB ROCHETTE couldn't have heard the increased sounds of shouting men trampling the room, nor the shots which soon grew less. He couldn't have felt the hands gently lift him.

He couldn't, he realized later, have possibly been aware of those things, and yet, later still, they told him that he grinned thorugh his crimson mask of blood when Buck Rochete lifted him, when the rest of the nesters were cleaning up the few scattered gunmen from town.

One night Corb awakened, conscious of the battered body that sent sharp twinges of pain through every fiber.

He was in a strange bed, and a clean-shaven, professional-looking medico stood by grinning at him. Then, as his vision cleared, he made out the thin face of Buck, who was smiling also, and nearby the Swede, Ole, and Mrs. Sorensen.

The first words he said were, "The Parson?"

Buck sitting by the bed, laughed. "You got him, Corb. You must have been unconscious, and the way the medico tells it a sorta spasm jerked your trigger finger on the cocked gun. He was comin' up to finish you with that little derringer he carried in his sleeve. But you got there first. And after that— Well, the rest just went from there as we busted in.

"We stampeded the cattle, all right— an' spent the rest of the time rounding 'em up. But that saved both the longhorns, and us. The Parson, of course, never rightly owned that land he'd settled the nesters on. But we've filed on it now. An' you an' me, Dad, have one of the best spreads of the lot. That, plus the Parson's percentage of the herd which the nesters are giving to us, give us a stake."

Corb shook his head. "I never got a

(Continued on page 128)

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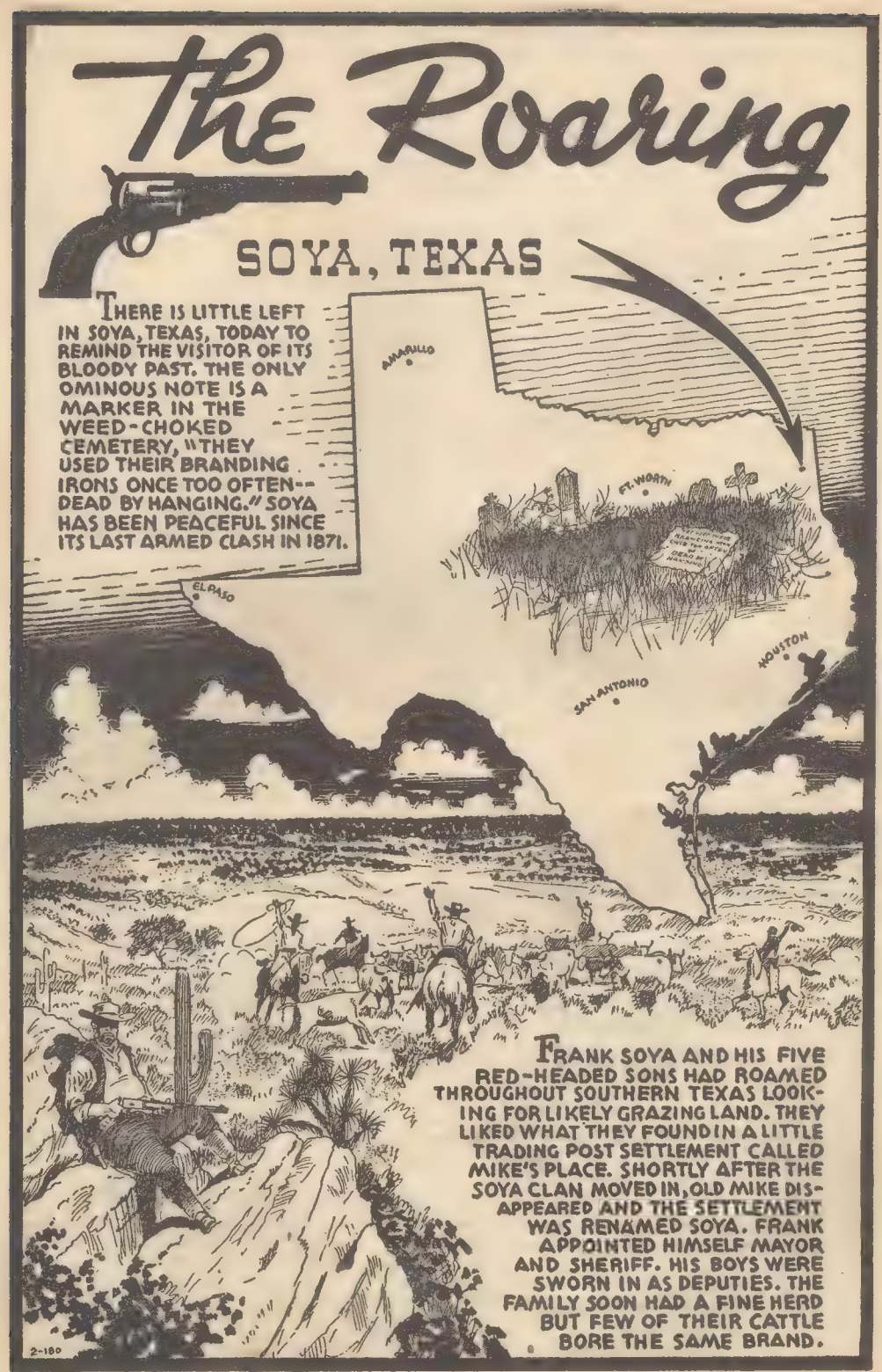
The Roaring
SOYA, TEXAS
THERE IS LITTLE LEFT IN SOYA, TEXAS, TODAY TO REMIND THE VISITOR OF ITS BLOODY PAST. THE ONLY OMINOUS NOTE IS A MARKER IN THE WEED-CHOKED CEMETERY, "THEY USED THEIR BRANDING IRONS ONCE TOO OFTEN--DEAD BY HANGING." SOYA HAS BEEN PEACEFUL SINCE ITS LAST ARMED CLASH IN 1871.
AMARILLO
EL PASO
FT. WORTH
HOUSTON
SAN ANTONIO
FRANK SOYA AND HIS FIVE RED-HEADED SONS HAD ROAMED THROUGHOUT SOUTHERN TEXAS LOOKING FOR LIKELY GRAZING LAND. THEY LIKED WHAT THEY FOUND IN A LITTLE TRADING POST SETTLEMENT CALLED MIKE'S PLACE. SHORTLY AFTER THE SOYA CLAN MOVED IN, OLD MIKE DISAPPEARED AND THE SETTLEMENT WAS RENAMED SOYA. FRANK APPOINTED HIMSELF MAYOR AND SHERIFF. HIS BOYS WERE SWORN IN AS DEPUTIES. THE FAMILY SOON HAD A FINE HERD BUT FEW OF THEIR CATTLE BORE THE SAME BRAND.
2-180

Towns

By FREDERICK BLAKESLEE and JHAN ROBBINS

RANCHERS IN SURROUNDING COUNTRY STARTED MISSING STEERS WHILE THE SOYAS FOUND THEIR HERD INCREASING. FRANK SOYA WAS ACCUSED OF BEING THE LEADER OF A CATTLE THIEF GANG. THE FIRST FOUR MEN TO MAKE SUCH ACCUSATIONS WERE SOON RESTING IN BOOTHILL. THE FIFTH CAME WITH AN ARMED POSSE. FOR THREE DAYS THE SOYAS BLAZED AWAY FROM THEIR RANCH-HOUSE AND AT SUNDOWN THE INVADING ARMY RETREATED, LEAVING BEHIND EIGHTEEN DEAD.
THE SOYAS CONTINUED "BORROWING CATTLE" AND ANSWERING PROTESTS WITH LEAD. IN MARCH OF 1871 THEIR EMBITTERED NEIGHBORS ORGANIZED FOR AN ALL OUT ATTACK ON THE "STEALING SOYAS" AS THEY WERE NOW CALLED. THIS TIME THEY WERE SUCCESSFUL. TWO OF THE SOYA BOYS WERE KILLED IN THE FRACAS. PAPA AND THE OTHER THREE SONS WERE HUNG FROM STURDY COTTONWOODS, THEN TOSSED IN A COMMON GRAVE. ONLY THEIR NAME REMAINED BEHIND ON THE MAP.

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Gun-Cure for

"Get onto your cayuses, gents, and raise a tall dust."

CHAPTER ONE

The Big Steal

DOCTOR Thane Milan emerged from the coffee room of the Porter Hotel and looked upon a familiar scene. Early sunlight lay hard and bright along Calle Mayor, and Druryton was beginning to stir. Bypassing the

Range-Grab Fever

Doc Thane's medicine could work wonders against the smallpox, the plague, and the black death. . . . But what would it avail against the smoking guns of the Vermejo Land-Grab Pool—or the darkly sinister wiles of the Señorita Gun-Boss of Caballero Basin?

Two-Fisted Novelette of Border Justice

dusty roadway with its burros, Doc Thane's eyes went to a newly painted sign swinging before a whitewashed adobe.

LUCERO OCATE Y BERNAL, M. D.

There, he thought, is my first competitor in seven years—and my finish. He had reason to feel pessimistic. His head pounded and his mouth was cotton-dry from over-indulgence. Drink was the one battle he'd lost.

Loss of his second was now in the making. Bernal, in his first week here, had been coroner and County Health Commissioner, replacing Doc Thane. And, worse, he had been consulted professionally by men and women Doc Thane had served many years.

It had been galling to lose business, even business that afforded only necessities. It wasn't the money—he could have made money easily in the States. Loneliness was the hunger that had turned him to drink and had driven him West. A doctor without practice could be lonely in Druryton.

Hoof echoes roused him. Twenty youthful paisanos swept into town, tight-lipped, chill-eyed, ignoring the man who had nursed them through their adolescent illnesses. They bristled with the tools of death. Wincing, Doc Thane watched them rear their ponies off the street, heard them enter Moreno's by the alley.

He thought bitterly, Here's the rising generation of Upper Vermejo Basin, writing the destiny of its little people. Sons of goatherds, vaqueros, miners, who swapped the cream of life for the Penitente lash and fanatical fearlessness. *Hombres que saben morir.* Men who know how to die!

Now Marc Mather—the town's first citizen—emerged from his office and quit the street, appearing moments later with Sheriff Quinlan. The pair entered the adobe jailhouse and Doc heard the jangle of a cranked telephone.

Frightened, Doc rubbed his stubbled jaw, buttoned his threadbare coat about him and sought the rear of Moreno's Place. Here rein-tied ponies dozed at the rack. Saddle scabbards were empty. Doc's fears were confirmed.

A HUSH fell as Doc Thane entered. "Amigos!" Doc's Spanish was in perfect idiom. "Your coming is a challenge. Sheriff Quinlan and Mather are at the telephone."

"Well!" Ramon Naranjos stood forth, tall, slender, wild-eyed. "Who do the *gran caballeros* call, señor?"

"Men of the Vermejo Pool! Men of Mustang Cordes, Tubby Turner and X. Kymoe!"

"Bueno!" Appreciation swept the youthful gathering. "They play our game, *compañeros!*" And to Doc Thane, Ramon said, "We planned it so, Señor Doctor."

"God forbid. In an hour, you'll have to face fifty hired killers."

" 'Sta 'ueno. Why do you think we came, señor?"

"Why haven't I known your lives are so worthless?" complained Doc Thane. "It might have spared me many a hard ride. Use your brains. Go home and attend your business. You can win nothing here but death."

"That is right, señor. We die to make a chance for our people."

"Gallant." Scorn edged Doc Thane's words. "A noble gesture. You only make misery for your loved ones. Each death leaves you weaker, your enemies stronger. If you must fight, gather money to hire capable lawyers."

"Lawyers—bah! Buzzards to pick our flesh."

"If I weep," snapped Doc, "it is for your blind stubbornness. The Maxwell Grant was voided years ago. Your grandfathers shrugged away their chance to homestead."

Ramon spat. "Damn the history, señor! Our grandfathers never thought of title

until settlers swarmed like grasshoppers. At Santa Fe, they were told they owned good squatters' titles. Now, after generations, Mather orders us off. Let him try."

Doc Thane argued with little conviction.. The right to the land rested with these men. Now they faced an ouster.

Marcus Mather, land agent and broker, had wrested control of Colfax County politics from a dying man, Eulogio Baca. Attracted to Upper Vermejo Basin, knowing its residents were without title, he started proceedings in Santa Fe, had the lands selected from the Federal Land Office and bought them at auction, at a dollar and a quarter an acre.

Doc Thane had learned that Mather was going to sell these holoings to the Vermejo Pool—Cordes, Turner and Kymoe—at a profit of twenty-five dollars an acre.

Now Doc Thane quit Moreno's Place. He discovered Sheriff Quinlan alone in his office, chewing a fat cigar and looking like a fat cat that had swallowed a canary.

"Well, Milan, what the hell do you want? I'm very busy."

"This won't take long, Sheriff. How far you willing to go to further Mather's crooked schemes? In other words, what are you obligated to do in order to earn what he pays you?"

Quinlan bounced up, his face apoplectic. "Now look here, you sawed-off pill rassler! You better lay off that kind of talk an' keep your own nose clean.. If you insist on buttin' into my business—"

"You'll what?" asked Doc Thane, calmly.

His eyes narrowed to slits, the lawman whipped out his spare gun and leveled it. "I'll kill you. So help me, I'll shoot you down like a dog."

"That answers my question, Quinlan. Mather's money is worth the price of murder to you. There's still time to save yourself. But if you allow the Pool to gun down those Vermejo kids, I'll report it to the governor as cool-blooded murder."

The lawman's eyes searched Doc Thane's person for a weapon. "Get out!" he raged.

The medico laughed. "I'll stay, Quinlan, as long as I've got a patient, and to hell with your threats. Personally, I don't believe in guns, but I will fight you with fists, here and now. You got the guts?"

"Get out, Milan, before I blow you out!"

Outside, Doc filled his lungs, moving along toward the sign fronting Mather's place.

MARCUS S. MATHER
Broker
Lands - Cattle - Mines
Money to Loan

From his swivel chair, the great man smiled expansively. "Doc, come in," he cried. "I thought I'd have to get shot to earn a visit from you."

"In that case, Mr. Mather, you'd have called in Doctor Bernal."

"You wrong me, Doc. Drink? No? Your abstinence reminds folks of their vices, Doc. Honest, I'm sorry about Bernal. That wasn't my idea, I assure you."

"Soft soap, Mather. I lost your patronage with my testimony in that mine case."

"Pshaw, don't antagonize your friends, Doc. Don't be too independent."

"Listen, Mather, this town runs red by your phone orders to Pool gunmen."

Mather started. "You been listening to my phone business, Milan?"

"Undo that order, Mather. Those kids are defending their lands and homes."

"Why come bellyaching to me, Doc? Should I bust down and cry?"

"The deal is yours, Mather. Call off your gunmen or their blood will be forever on your head. Call it off, I beg of you."

"And let desperados take our town?

You're crazy. That's your trouble."

"You know they're not desperados, Mather. Killing them will blot your record."

"Why my record, Doc?"

"I'll report whatever happens here today to the governor and U. S. Attorney."

Mather lit a cigar, exhaling smoke. "I've heard," he smirked, "doctors neglect themselves while healing others. You're contracting fatal fever wasting sympathy on doomed patients. Go to your office and tend to your business. And good day to you."

Doc Thane sought his suite of rooms in the hotel. As he walked along, the town fronts echoed many hoofbeats.

From the north Pool ranges came cowboys—thirty-five armed warriors led by Mustang Cordes, Tubby Turner and X. Kymoe. Dreamers of empire!

Into the plaza they came, racking their mounts and rattling into the Dos Cabezas Saloon. Sheriff Quinlan joined them, but Doc looked in vain for a move by Mather. Druryton held its breath.

CHAPTER TWO

The Pool Plays Rough!

SILENCE dragged. Suddenly the Vermejo youths came boiling to the walk. With no counter move from the Dos Cabezas, they lost their starch.

The sheriff barked, "What you pelados want?" Receiving no answer, he said, "Wearin' guns is agin' the law. Get your dewclaws up!" Cordes, Kymoe and Turner joined him and several punchers followed.

Doc, startled by the creak of footsteps on the roof deck, shouted: "Get inside, you bald-faced fools!"

A gunblast from a roof sent a Vermejo man down, screaming. The others drew and Doc braced at his window. From doorways of invaded buildings came a deadly crossfire. The doomed youngsters answered with a thin fire, some dead as they triggered.

Survivors, screaming their defiance, backed into Moreno's. Of the original twenty, six gained Moreno's doorway. One died there, two more in the barroom. Three reached the ponies, one falling with foot unstirruped, another as he mounted. The last one choked the horn, spurring. He was riddled and wouldn't go far.

Echoes ran out. Smoke coiled over Calle Mayor. Doc Thane sank into his chair, sick. On the street, the assassins stood uneasily. They shifted and looked about. They reloaded and fiddlefooted until Mark Mather came to the street, shouting:

"Good work, men! Druryton salutes you. You've beaten back renegade challenge and we're proud of you. Everybody to the hotel bar. Drinks are on me."

When they were all in the Porter House and the street was clear, Doc Thane descended to examine the shapeless bundles in blood-soaked clothing, feeling for life. He found it in only one, in the barroom, and that life vanished even as he detected it. At a cost of but three men killed, the Pool had done its work efficiently and well.

With his check not yet complete, Doc Thane was joined by his competitor, Lucero Ocate y Bernal. The man seemed smilingly unaffected by the carnage. "*Buenos dias,* Señor Doctor. Nice day. Can I be of any assistance?"

"Yes," Doc rapped. "Clean up the fine work your *compañeros* have done here. Clean the bodies off the street."

Bernal showed white teeth. "Certainly. I'll call an inquest. But first I must verify my belief that there will be two more killings, maybe three." Laughing softly, he crossed the street and joined those crowding the hotel barroom. Enthusiastically hating the man, Doc Thane made arrangements with the undertaker guaran-

teeing the expense. He could do no less.

All afternoon, while the Mather and Pool crowds got whooping drunk, and while other townsmen cowered indoors, Doc Thane sat at his desk. Suppose those kids had obeyed and gone home. Would that have guaranteed them tomorrow, or the day after that?

THE RATTLE of his door wakened him. He sat up, shaking off sleep. It was night. He stumbled to the door, flung it open, standing aside as he recalled Bernal's veiled threat. "Who is it?"

"Señor Doctor!" The voice was low, feminine. "I am Ramona Naranjos. I must talk with you."

That stirred him fully awake. "Ramona, come in." He caught her hand, drew her into the room and locked the door. "You have come in from the Vermejo. Did anybody see you come here?"

"I came secretly, señor. I know my danger, but one of our people is sick. Hurt badly. If he is to live, I must take you back with me." He caught the hard, swift tempo of her breathing, studied the pale oval of her frightened, desperate face. It was like the face of Ramon Naranjos. Yet here was a gentleness of feature lacking in the zealous face of her twin. "Will you attend this man, Señor Doctor?"

"Ramon got through, did he?"

She caught her breath. *"Si, señor.* But he is terribly wounded and so weak. Father Rafael has administered last rites. Ramon will surely die unless you—"

"Of course I'll come. Could Ramon talk? Did he tell you all that happened here?"

Her head moved. "No. He mumbled something about coyote treachery. And he keeps calling his friends, 'Sus, Alberto, Guillermo, Jose, Aurelio—all the boys of his *cuadrilla.* What happened, Señor Doctor? Are they in trouble? Arrested maybe?"

His every instinct was to lie to her, to put her off, anything to prevent her knowing the horror of the morning. But she had his hand and she was standing very close, so close her breath was on his cheek, the perfume of her hair in his nostrils. It came to him with something of a shock that this girl, seen in the home of her parents, was suddenly a woman, beautiful and alluring. Better far, for her, that she know the brutal truth now.

"If they had applied their *cuadrilla* to boy fun, Ramona," he said, solemnly, "they would all be alive today."

"Alive?" He felt a shudder go through her. *"Maria, Madre Santissima!* Are some dead, Señor Doctor? Who? Which ones? How?"

"They came to town with guns, Ramona. Daring the power of Mather and the Vermejo Pool. I begged them to go home, but they refused. When the trouble started, they were like rabbits against wolves. If Ramon dies, the count will be full. All the others are dead."

She gave a stricken cry and clung to him, shuddering. Her lips moved in prayer for the dead.

"Come, girl, get hold of yourself. If we are to save Ramon, we must get started."

"No, you must not go, Señor Doctor. Those killers will be watching. If you leave here, they will follow and kill you too. If it is God's will, Ramon will recover, but let us not have more bloodshed."

"Very well, girl. Go now, and do not let them see you." He led her to the door and let her out. For a moment, she held his hand and he thought she would say something. But a sob shook her and she tore her hand away and was gone, descending the narrow back stairs.

DOC THANE drew on his coat, caught up his bag and followed her. He moved cautiously but encountered nobody.

Following the dark alley, he turned into the rear of Northrups Barn. The hostler was in his office. Doc Thane could hear him snoring. Horses stamped and munched hay in the stalls located to the left.

Moving to the nearest animal, Doc Thane felt for the saddle atop the partition, lifted it on and cinched up. He was fastening the latigo when a smell alarmed him—the strong smell of whiskey.

Doc poised, waiting. The odor passed and he had decided it came from Northrup's cubby office. He was fitting the bridle when the horse snorted and backed away. As the medico caught and controlled it, a challenge came from the stall he had quitted.

"Late for a ride, Doctor Milan, but an excellent idea. I'll ride with you and clear the whiskey cobwebs from my brain." Doctor Bernal stepped out.

Doc Thane shifted bag and bridle to his left hand. "Sorry, Bernal." he kept his voice low, "but I prefer to do my riding alone."

The young Latin smiled. "How unkind, Doctor. How unwise. I have only to shout and you will not ride anywhere. *Comprende?*"

He was inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. His jaw jutted invitingly and Doc Thane, who never apologized for his stature or strength, struck him, knocking him backward into the manure. Following in, he lifted the man and slammed him into the aisle.

When he rode from the barn, moments later, he left Bernal tied, gaged and covered with hay, in the mow.

He spurred northward. Mile after mile he went, with dust trailing behind. Wondering how a wounded man could have possibly made this ride.

Past Ten Mile Ford, the road narrowed between fences and the smell of clover was cool and friendly. Dogs roused as he turned into a lane and headed toward a light against the hill. Splashing through the overflow of irrigation water, he ignored the clamoring dogs and dismounted at a pole corral.

Dogs, whining about the corral gate, drew his attention to the still shape lurking there. How difficult was this business going to get?

"All right!" he croaked. "Come on out of there!"

CHAPTER THREE

Vengeance for Nineteen

"SEÑOR Doctor!" Movement flickered and Ramona came out, sobbing. "I prayed you'd come and it happened so quick." Wild with joy, she embraced him.

Doc Thane patted her soft cheek. "How's your brother, Ramona?"

"*Quien sabe?* Only this minute I got here. Come, we go see."

She led him into a kitchen warm and redolent with boiled goat meat and roasted *mais*. A man snored on corn husks in one corner, several children sleeping alongside him. In the lighted sick room beyond, a dark, squatty woman came off her knees beside the bed.

"Ramona, *querida.*" The women embraced and doc went to the youth on the straw tick. He was flushed, feverish, his breath rasping ominously. His wild, reckless face, made savage by flushed cheek bones, was otherwise pale. He tried to moisten his burning lips with a dry tongue, his pleading eyes on Doc's face. The medico wet a towel, moistened his mouth and sponged his face.

"Gracias, Señor Doctor," he breathed. "You were right. The others, did they—?"

"None escaped, Ramon, but you. Let's see if you can make it."

"Look well, Señor Doctor, but you cannot see into my soul. I will that I shall

get well, for the souls of nineteen *compañeros* cry to me for vengeance."

"I deal with bodies, son, not souls." Doc Thane called for lights, hot water, clean towels, removed his coat and went to work. One bullet had chipped the spine, deflecting out the right flank. One had splintered a rib on the right, piercing the lung and lodging against his left nipple. A third drilled his left shoulder blade, lodging against the socket—a bleeder. The fourth and fifth were simple wounds, one in the neck, one in the thigh. Three bullets were in his flesh, lessening his chances.

Doc Thane instructed Ramona to wave an open chloroform bottle under Ramon's nose. Ramon, always conscious, gritted his teeth but never cried out. Then the job was finished and Ramon slept, his sweaty smile a promising sign.

Doc Thane, gaunt and gray, was surprised to find the night gone. There was a smell of coffee drifting in from the kitchen and the fierce whispers of Mother Naranjos for quiet from her children and her man. Ramona sat on the bed, her face buried in her hands, not weeping but exhausted. Doc Thane laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I think we have won it, girl. He has an amazing vitality."

She caught his hand and pressed it to her lips. And when she said, "Thank you; thank you so very much," the tears came and he caught her up and held her tightly and let her cry against his breast. His eyes were bleak and they were also studious as they shuttled from her fair skin and brown hair, to that of the sleeping lad in the bed.

Yes, they could be twins, surely brother and sister, but it was hard to reconcile their relationship to the dark, stubby Naranjos couple and their inky-haired brood. Even as he turned the thought over in his weary mind, the door opened and Señora Naranjos came in with coffee. As Doc Thane took his arms from about Ramona, the older woman nodded and smiled her approval.

"There is color in his face, Señor Doctor. That is good. You have done so much and we have done so little. After your coffee, I wish to speak to you, alone."

"About what?"

"About payment, Señor Doctor."

"Forget it, señora. You owe me nothing."

"We owe you so much, Señor Doctor, it can never rest easy on the conscience. I must speak to you, after coffee."

When he had ordered Ramona to bed and promised her he would return in the evening to look after his patient, Mother Naranjos walked out to the barn with him.

"I did not want to talk about the money we owe you," she confided, "though El Señor Dios had laid it upon our hearts to pay when and if there is money again. It is of Ramon and Ramona I wish to speak."

"They are not your children, Señora?"

"They think they are, Señor Doctor. We have raised them with the same loving care as our other niños. You have guessed it, and maybe they too have guessed why they are so much lighter. *Quien sabe, Dios sabe.* When *mi marido* and I were newly married we brought a new wagon filled with the gifts of my *familia* from Chihuahua across the Jornado del Muerto. It was terribly dry and we suffered.

"But one wagon was not so lucky as we were. The horses were dead in the traces. The man and woman were dead in the wagon bed, water that would have saved them still in their canteen. They would not use it for anything but to keep life in their babies—a boy and a girl. Twins."

She crossed herself, as if the memory was still an agony. "We buried those poor people, Guillermo and I, and took the babies. We came to love them and

never reported finding them. But I have papers, Señor Doctor, that tell Ramona and Ramon are of fine merchant family, from Saint Louis. They deserve opportunities we cannot give them in our poverty. Did I see that you are fond of Ramona? Take her, Señor Doctor, be kind to her and she will make a good wife."

Doc Thane's eyes sparkled. "Would you pay the bill with Ramona, Madre? Shame. Oh, I am joking, of course. But suppose we leave such matters to Ramona—and to me." He rose to the saddle. "If Ramon gets too hot and breathes too fast, wring out cold cloths for his body. Keep him quiet. I shall be along this evening." Whereupon he set out for Druryton.

HE CAME riding back to Druryton at an early hour. The town was quiet. He rode into Northrup's Feed Barn and was confronted by a tight-lipped Charley Northrup.

"Whatever from hell?" the man exclaimed. "I thought you'd be far gone. What possessed you to come back here, Doc?"

"Why shouldn't I come here, Charley? I live here."

The barn man looked wildly about. "Have you gone stark, raving crazy, Doc? You come here in the night and help yourself to one of my horses. Jethro Bass comes into the barn to pet the ponies and talk to them—you know how he is—and discovers you. You shoot him down and ride away. Any reason why I shouldn't expect you to keep going, Doc? What happened?"

Doc Thane dismounted, handing Northrup the rein. "Did Jethro say I shot him down, Charley?"

"Jethro? Good lord, no! That boy's deader than a mackerel an' Sheriff Quinlan's looking for you." He trailed the rein and ran to the door. "Don't reckon anybody saw you ride in, Doc. There's still time for you to get away. I don't know what happened, Doc, but for friendship's sake I'll let you have that horse. Hurry up. Time's running out."

Doc Thane shook his head. "The charge is full of holes, Charley. In the first place, I would have no reason for shooting Jethro if I had a gun, which I haven't. Again, if Jethro was killed, who says I shot him—and why? Lastly, you answer your own question. If I had killed Jethro, would I come back?"

Northrup puzzled over it. "But what did happen then? It ain't like you, Doc, to come take a horse without tellin' me. I was tired an' lay down on my bunk an' went to sleep. I was woke up by a shot. I run out to the stalls an' there I find Jethro lyin' dead. Then Jake Dudley come into the barn an' told me he seen you ridin' hell fer leather out of town. An' a minute later that new Doc, Bernal, come in breathin' hard. 'Lowed he'd seen you kill Jethro an' he'd chased you but couldn't ketch yuh."

Doc Thane filled his lungs. There would be no sleep for him, not for some time. "A clumsy frame-up, Charley," he said. "He didn't see me shoot anybody. He didn't run after me, though he did try to stop me from leaving the barn. I slugged him and rode."

"He was likely ordered to pay you off for attending those poor kids on the street, Doc. Pretty awful, wasn't it? When the crowd swarmed in here, after the Jethro shooting, I heard the sheriff tell Doc Bernal you'd gone to doctor the only one of those kids to escape, making you accessory after the murder of the three Pool cowboys that died. He never mentioned those guilty of murdering those poor kids."

"Careful of your talk, Charley. It's dangerous. Thanks for what you've told me. Now if I can learn why Jethro was killed, so I'll have the facts to base a judgment."

He turned and walked out the rear,

Northrup puzzling as he stared after him.

"Judgment? Now what the hell does he mean by that? Queer character, Doc, an' hubbin' some hell by not stirrin' a tall, fast dust."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sell-Out!

WITH the stable odors behind him, Doc Thane moved along the alley with his black bag. Turning in at a rear doorway, he found Carlos Moreno alone in his saloon, head in his hands, elbows braced on the bar. He started at Doc's step and his eyes widened.

"Doctor!" he gasped. "They—they hunt you for murder!"

Doc Thane moved to the bar. "Remember this, Carlos. They don't care who they hang for Jethro's murder, so long as it's someone they want out of the way. Whiskey."

The saloonman poured, glancing nervously toward the street. "If they find you here, Señor Doctor, I shall die."

The medico drank and drank again. "Why are they suddenly so bloodthirsty, Carlos? By habit, Mather's been slow, steady, with some regard for the law. If only I could learn all the facts."

"Attend me, señor," whispered Carlos. "My amigo, Chico Hernandez, says Jethro was not so stupid as we thought. Gathered at the barn with the others, he saw Sheriff Quinlan remove a badge from under Jethro's shirt."

"Jethro? Surely not."

"Jethro was a lawman, maybe a marshal."

"I see." Doc Thane nodded. "Mather discovered Jethro's secret and had to kill him—he knew so much. Watching, they let me tie up Bernal and ride from town, then decoyed Jethro to the barn, killed him and framed me. How else could Bernal have gotten loose and run into the barn with word he'd chased me after I'd killed Jethro? Maybe I won't make them as good a scapegoat, Carlos, as they imagine."

"Chico says they found your *pistola*, where you dropped it."

"Mine?" Doc Thane laughed. "I don't own one."

"Matias Ybarra, the gunsmith, says he sold you the gun, yesterday."

"Yeah? Air tight, huh?"

"Very bad for you, Doctor. What will you do?"

"I can run, Carlos, but running won't do. A murder charge would always hang over me. And the Basin folk will lose a badly-needed friend." He laid a dollar on the bar. "I'll see Mr. Matias about that gun. May as well have the game along with the name."

BEFORE the medico reached the rear of the gunsmith's place, a woman stepped out to fling a pan of dishwater. Her bright, sharp eyes came to him and recognition froze her. "Dios!" she breathed. Doc Thane waved her inside.

"Get in and keep your mouth shut!"

He entered, locked the door and prodded the woman into the gun shop. Matias, already working, didn't look up until his young wife said, "Matias, this man—"

Matias squared around, his pocked face blank one moment, sullen and scared the next. He searched the medico's face. "He made me say it," he growled. "Death if I didn't, twenty-five Mather dollars if I did. My wife—"

"I understand, Matias," said Doc, gently. "How's your conscience?" The gunsmith didn't answer. "I'm glad you're paid, but I can't see you rate as a liar. Hand me the gun you claim you sold me."

The gunsmith nodded, drew a weapon from the case. "This is a good pistols, señor. The other one—well, knowing it was not to kill, I chose one with a broken

pin." He laughed. The woman laughed. Doc Thane smiled.

"Who knows this, beside you and me, Matias?"

"Nobody, señor. Not a soul."

"Tell nobody, Matias, and say no word about me, understand? You are now free of debt. For the sake of your beautiful wife, keep it so. *Adios.*"

As he opened the door giving to the alley, a sibilant sound arrested him. Carlos Moreno was pressed into the door recess, staring along the alley.

"*Cuidado,* Señor Doctor! The sheriff's posse is saddling at Northrup's Corral."

"See if you can learn why, Carlos, and where they're going."

"That I have already done, señor. They now learn why the Vermejo boys came here."

"Yes? Why?"

"Half came here to make a show while the other half stopped the Las Vegas stage. It happened near Maxwell. They took twenty-five thousand dollars, killed the coach crew. The posse rides now to round them up and evict all Vermejo people from their homes. *Dios,* the barrancas will run red, no?"

Doc Thane's lips flattened. He gripped the gun at his middle. Mark Mather was working fast. Alarmed that an undercover lawman had worked into his organization, he was setting the stage for a quick clean-up. Twenty-five thousand, stained with the blood of two innocent men.

"Carlos," said the medico, "it's better you don't stir up suspicion by having them find you out of your barroom. Stand by."

With Moreno gone, Doc Thane stood at the doorway of Matias' gunshop, watching the feverish activity at the corral. He looked in vain for Sheriff Quinlan. The posse seemed to be under the command of Tony Salazar, Chief Deputy, who led them into Moreno's Place after saddling. There they stood, waiting.

When the alley was clear, Doc Thane rounded the corner and came to the street. He could hear voices but at the moment nobody was in sight. Treading on eggs, he crossed the street and went back between buildings.

Moments later, he was poised at a side door, used by Mark Mather to hide his entries from those on the street.

From the murmur of voices, Doc Thane could only guess how many were inside. If it proved there were more than just Mather and Quinlan, he would have guessed wrong about a lot of things.

DOC THANE turned the knob, swung the panel slowly inward. Mark Mather's voice droned on, confidential, unctuous, self-satisfied.

"That Jethro numbskull! I guess he was putting that stupidity on, but I still can't believe it. Few men fool me, even a little bit. Well, good actor or bad, Jethro Bass is where he can't harm us."

"You know how it is with the law, Mark." Quinlan had none of Mather's confidence. "You get rid of one marshal and you've got two more on your neck. I don't like it."

The broker taunted him. "You're an old woman, Quinlan. Quit worrying. This Bernal, following up, found me too smart, didn't he? And any that come after him will find your badge laying on your desk, and a merry ha-ha on mine. We're traveling, fella. London, Paris, Mexico City, Buenos Aires. With big money in our pants. I've ordered the Pool to pay up in cash before Wednesday or I'm selling the Vermejo stuff to the Southern Rockies Land Development Company. They'll bust their necks, you see."

"Before you can deliver, Mark, you've first got to oust them Mexes. That falls on me. I don't like it. Suppose something goes wrong?"

"What can go wrong? The law's on

our side, remember? All your riders are deputized. I've got a half dozen paid to swear we had those places posted for the required thirty days. As for the Mexes themselves, their fighters are dead and they couldn't resist if they had the nerve, which they haven't. It stacks up like this. Tomorrow we deliver the land. Next day the Pool pays. Next week, you and me—we'll be only bad headaches in Druryton. There. Twenty-five thousand. That's it. I—well!"

He pushed back the thick sheaves of currency, his lips tight as he glowered at the visitor who had just closed and locked the door. Sheriff Quinlan bounced up, pale and bug-eyed. Both men had shed their coats and their guns jutted from high belted holsters. Mather showed iron nerve as the medico pocketed the door key, rising from his chair, grinning crookedly.

"I've known you quite a spell, Doc," he said, genially, "and still I can't make you out." He scowled. "You shouldn't come busting in like this. I guess I shouldn't have encouraged competition here for you. It gives you too much time to horn into my business. What is it now?"

Doc Thane moved toward them, hands relaxed, smile bitter. "Talk, gentlemen. A short, sweet talk. When you two accomplished the murder of those Vermejo boys, you climbed the tree of misfortune. When you robbed the stage of that money you've just counted, you crawled out on a limb. Maybe those things ain't my business. But when you frame me for murder, you make it my business and saw the limb off behind you."

Mather wrinkled his nose. "You're breaking my heart, Doc."

The sheriff cleared his throat. "Shall I make the arrest, Mark?"

Mather seemed unheeding, nervously uneasy as he listened to the deputies roar from Druryton. He was strangely meek. "Arrest? Hm. Off your last demonstration, you couldn't arrest a cottontail. I'm sick of you, Quinlan. Get out of here."

The sheriff went white. "If you mean about Bernal, I can explain."

"Explain, hell! When'll you learn silence so folks won't know you're a fool?" He glared at Doc Thane. "I'm not ready yet to deal with you. Say your piece and get out."

"I'll make it brief, Mather. The law is closing in on you. You'll do well to confess you ordered those Vermejo kids slaughtered, killed Jethro Bass because he carried a badge, and framed me for murder."

Mather snorted. "You're crazy. If you're here five minutes from now, I'll—"

"In five minutes, I'll be gone, maybe with one or both of you. Give me your gun. Steady now." He stepped forward as Mather stabbed for his pistol.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bloody Pool

DOC THANE'S weapon gushed flame and lead. Mather swayed, moaned and crashed, his gun unfired. Icily, Doc swung his smoking .45. But Quinlan stood reaching ceilingward, quavering:

"Don't . . . don't shoot. He made me do whatever I done."

Doc Thane accepted this and took the lawman's gun. "Start talking! What about Bernal?"

Quinlan looked fearfully at Mather's body. "Bernal's a marshal," he choked. "Mather had me search his stuff last night. I found a badge. Bernal was to die tonight."

"So much for men's plans, Sheriff. Is there a safe at the jailhouse?"

"Yes, why?"

"Tote that currency down. If you do any hollerin', I'll have to shoot you. Get moving."

Under the scrutiny of suspicious townsmen who'd heard the shot, they strode

from Mather's office, Quinlan apprehensively, Doc Thane conscious of men invading Mather's place.

Closeted in the jailhouse, with the money locked up, Doc said, "Fetch Bernal, Sheriff, and walk easy. You're going straight from here out or God help you. Hurry!"

The disheveled Latin came from his cell, speaking flawless English instead of his native Spanish. "Thanks, Doc. I didn't expect your help, after treating you so badly."

"I understand, Bernal. A marshal plays his cards as he must."

"Department of Justice, Doctor. With Operative Jethro Bass, investigating a conspiracy against the peace and security of Vermejo Basin. Poor Jethro won't see his excellent ground work bear fruit. If I do, I'll owe it to you, Milan."

"Not at all, Bernal." Doc Thane grinned. "I take it you are not a doctor."

"Once a not very good veterinarian. Mather leaped at the doctor title in my letter of introduction and, peeved at you, made me coroner. That's that. Any idea where Mather might be?"

Doc Thane told him, adding. "Go easy on Quinlan, Bernal. He's a weakling. I learned from him you were an officer, and in danger. Let's not waste time. Deputies ride into Upper Vermejo to evict the people and sell their lands to the Pool. We've got to stop it. Come along."

Quinlan furnished Bernal a weapon and they accompanied him to the stable, Bernal eager, Quinlan morosely thoughtful. Mounted, they rode from town, watched silently by shocked townsmen before Mather's door.

Quinlan remained silent until they crossed the river at Ten Mile Ford. There he blurted: "What you aimin' to do up thisaway?"

"Best we can, Quinlan, to keep your deputies from starting a bloody war."

"How? They're on legal business. Mather bought these lands, published notices."

"Yeah? Mather confessed he had men who'd falsely swear the lands were posted."

"I have proof," added Bernal, "the selections were had by graft. Perjury, bribery and forgery are involved. You know perfectly well, Quinlan, that there's nothing legal about any part of it. You've got to call off those deputies and disband them. If you don't—"

"Suppose I don't, Bernal?" A touch of spirit lifted Quinlan's chin. "I know those boys. I'd face prison sooner than their guns. An' they won't call off easy, being on a bonus basis an' sort of pardners with Mather."

"More evidence of graft, Quinlan," said Bernal, "and you're tarred with it. You better talk fast to those badge-toting crooks."

QUINLAN'S fear became panic when far gun echoes came to their ears. He would have wheeled about and sought escape. But Doc Thane, anticipating this, caught his bridle rein. "You're talking to those deputies if I have to tote you to them," he said. "Don't try any more funny business, Quinlan."

Doc appeared cool and unperturbed, but really he was more scared than Quinlan. Judging from the direction of that gunfire, the deputies were encountering grim resistance at the Naranjos home, where Ramon fought for every breath. That meant Ramona was in danger.

He rolled the spurs, putting his mount into a hard gallop. The other two came swiftly behind him, striving to keep up.

He turned into the lane, still flooded from a gophered irrigation ditch, and slowed his pace lest the pony lose footing and go belly-up in the slippery mire. The other two closed up and three abreast they cantered toward the Naranjos house.

They could see the house in the distance.

Now, directly ahead, where a pasture fence cornered on the lane, a gun blasted and a face came over the tops of the rank weeds, the neck swiveling as the gunman verified what his ears told him of approaching horsemen. He had shot at the house but his interest was now on Doc Thane and his two companions.

He rose and moved so a cottonwood bole hid him from the defenders of the house. A rifle was in his hand and it was leveled and ready until he recognized the new arrivals.

"Sheriff!" he exclaimed. "You're just in time for the fandango, with hot lead trimmin's. I see you fetched Doc along. Good idea. Why didn't you bring Mark? Who's this gent?" He looked Bernal up and down, and Doc Thane knew this was not one of those who had precipitated the massacre in Druryton.

"This is Doc Bernal, the new medico," the sheriff said. "Deppity Ben Tilford, Doc."

"Doctor of gunsmoke," laughed Bernal. "Just a nosey Federal officer, that's all. Why don't you tell him the truth about Mather, Quinlan."

The deputy started and Quinlan stammered: "Mark couldn't come, Ben, 'cause he's dead."

"Dead. Mark?" The man stared. "What happened? Who killed him?"

Quinlan looked miserable. "Why—er—he had trouble with a feller an—"

"I killed him, Tilford," said Doc Thane. "His buying this valley, his ouster procedings and his sale to the Pool are all lawless and crooked, just as were his orders to you deputies. I suppose you fellows will insist you were fired on by these poor people?"

"Like hell." The man was now openly contemptuous. "Our orders was to put these *pelados* off, an' nothin' was said as to how. If they won't walk off, we'll gun 'em off. Me, I'm takin' orders from Mather, despite a couple of pill rollers that say he's d t."

"They're tellin' it to yuh straight, Tilford," admitted the sheriff. "I'm disbanding you boys an' rescinding all orders.

Come in tomorrow an' I'll pay you off."

"Includin 'the bonus Mather promised?"

"No bonuses, Ben."

"Then we won't disband, gents, an' what you gonna do about it? The pool bosses are with us, an' they've promised cash bonuses. You ain't gonna interfere, savvy? Get onto your cayuses an' raise a tall dust."

LIKE an arrow from a bowstring, Doc Thane leaped at Tilford, fended off the swinging rifle barrel and knocked him flat. Cursing, the man rolled, sat up and raised his rifle. Doc was far behind and must surely have died except for Bernal, who drew smoothly and broke the deputy's neck with one perfectly aimed shot.

These medicos, playing the game for keeps, glanced at the fear-convulsed sheriff. The man's attention was caught by the approach of Mustang Cordes, gun-hung and furious. "All right," he raged. "Talk fast, you! What was that for?"

The obvious cruelty here made Doc doubt Mather had ever swayed this big man much. Grimly awaiting an answer, Cordes was joined by others. Tubby Turner, massive, rounded, stinking of sweat. And X. Kymoe, with beetling black brows and inky walrus mustache. Also three cowboys loyal to the Pool.

Smelling showdown, Doc Thane looked at the sun, feeling it might be his last look. Patiently, he said, "Gentlemen, can Mr. Cordes speak for the Pool?"

Turner nodded. X. Kymoe said, "Anything Mustang says suits me."

"You'll abide by his agreement with me, as I speak for the Vermejo people?"

"Sure." Turner winked. "But what have the people got to say about it?"

He laughed and X. Kymoe joined in. Cordes waited, glaring. Doc Thane said, "You will learn, gentlemen, that the people have everything to say."

"Hogwash!" interrupted Cordes. "What agreement you expect to get out of me?"

"What's your aim, Mister Cordes?" asked Doc. "What's the Pool after?"

"Our money's worth, Milan. We paid Mather for the lands necessary to the full development of this cattle range. We are going to have those lands."

"Mather cannot deliver his end of the bargain, gentlemen, because he's dead."

It rocked them to their heels. "How come? Who killed Mark?"

"I did. He gave his life to verify that some men won't indefinitely submit to bullying. Knowing that, Cordes, you tell me again what the Pool wants."

"Same things, Milan. We're ousting these *pelado* squatters if it means fighting the length of the river, foot by foot."

"With Sheriff Quinlan looking on?"

"He don't worry us."

"All right then, what about Bernal here—a Department of Justice agent?"

They stared, and the Federal man said, "Road's end, boys. Uncle Sam strictly enforces his land settlement laws. Until now, the Pool isn't party to this land grab. Suppose you take your gunmen home and keep your hands clean."

"I call yuh!" said Cordes, rashly. "The gov'ment can't infringe our rights. If any agent tries to, he'll buck us." Cordes dropped his hand to his gun.

"Cordes," drawled Doc Thane, "you prove you deserve no better than Mather." Once again he bared the gun taken from Matias' gunshop. And Cordes was drawing as he backed from the little medico.

CHAPTER SIX

A Cold, Wet Grave!

DOC THANE leaped in, gun barrel rising and falling, muzzle raking Cordes' face, gashing one eye, crushing his nose, ripping his lips. Stunned, blind-

ed, the Pool leader cried a curse, fired blindly and fell. Before he lit, Doc bludgeoned him senseless with a solid blow against the skull.

A gunblast behind him drew Doc around. Turner and X. Kymoe had backed Cordes' play, with fatal results. Bernal downed Turner. Quinlan, deciding as to the winning side, drew and finished X. Kymoe. Bernal grinned at the medico.

"Thanks, Doc, for saving me one for trial."

Quinlan, still nervous, said, "Let's ride before the Pool punchers gun us."

Doc Thane eyed the three Pool punchers who had watched the fracas without so much as making a move toward their weapons. "You boys are getting smart," he said, grimly. "Take their guns, Bernal. Sheriff, you come with me. We're going up and stop this shooting."

"Stop it?" Quinlan was aghast. "Are you crazy? All you'll stop is a bullet."

"That won't matter much. Keep cover if you will. I'd like you to holler at those fellows and see if they won't listen to reason."

"He's right," said Bernal. "You better lie low here till they sort of run out of shooting shells, Doc. They're wasting lead against those adobe walls. Well, the salty son-of-a-gun! There, Sheriff, is a fighting man that missed his calling. He's surprised us twice already. Maybe he'll do it again."

Doc Thane had walked up through the willows and cottonwoods, hands swinging free, until he was close to the bank that shielded them from the occasional shot coming from the Naranjos buildings.

Then he shouted, "Hey! What in the hell you shooting at?"

It reached over the smash of guns, drawing the attention of some, who transmitted it on. Firing ebbed and men came warily, their hot guns on the medico.

"It's Doc Milan!" yelled one. "You bet-

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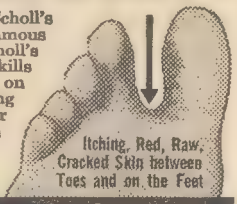

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ter dig out of this, Doc, before you get your tail feathers singed."

"What you shooting at?" repeated Doc.

"Them Spigs, Doc. We're oustin' 'em an' they won't oust peaceable, the fools. It won't be long now though."

"Who's your boss?"

"The sheriff, actin' for Mark Mather."

"You're playing sucker, boys." Doc forced confidence into his voice. "This firing on women and children will rouse the whole country against you. You're on your own too, with nobody to stand up for you. Mather's dead, and so is Turner and Kymoe. Mustang Cordes is lying back yonder, with the sheriff's come-alongs on him. He'll go to the Federal pen. Now you boys can go on chipping corners off those adobes, but wait till I get inside before you commence. I've got a patient in there."

"Cripes," blatted a bewildered cowpuncher. "What the hell we got to win?"

"A cold, wet grave—playin' a dead man's cards," answered another. "Me, I know when the sign's right to loop outa here." And he was running for his pony.

The word ran the ragged circle thrown about the adobes. The firing died out and there was withdrawal everywhere. Careless of any remaining threat from that source, Doc Thane quit the timber and strode toward the Naranjos house, chancing the anger of the outraged household.

He had taken very few steps when the rage of this violated family asserted itself. A gun spoke from a recessed window and a bullet plucked at Doc's coat, burning along his side only inches from his heart.

DOC THANE, never swerving, lifted his hands palm foremost, and continued on. He heard the feminine cry, *"Madre de Dios, es el doctor! No tira mas, no tira otra vez!"* The señora had recognized him. He did not need to knock upon the door. It opened in his face and Ramona stood there, the terror still lurk-

ing in her blue eyes, her fair cheeks smudged with gunpowder soot.

"Señor Doctor!" she gasped. "Forgive the shot. *Mi padre* mistook you."

"There is no harm from it, Ramona," he said, and he thought he'd never seen anything so beautiful. "Tell me, how is Ramon?"

"But very good, Señor Doctor."

"Call me Thane, Ramona."

"*Si*, Thane, he is very good. You have the magic touch. When those *malos hombres* came, he got out of bed and has been shooting. He feels tired now, and no wonder, but he will get well very soon."

"Your troubles are over, girl. Mather, Cordes, Turner and Kymoe are all out of the way. You can pick up your lives where they left off, till your fields and keep your homes."

"Thank God," breathed the girl. "And thank you, Señor—Thane. Whatever can we do to repay you?"

He smiled at her, an unwonted boldness in his eyes. "That's what I want to talk to you about. I've come for payment, and I am in no mood to be put off."

She took a step backward, staring at his face, bewildered and a little hurt. "But, Señor Doctor, you know how it is with us. We are poor people but we will pay when there is money. Is it that you do not trust us?"

"If I did not fully trust you, Ramona, and love you with all my heart, I would not suggest such a price." He caught her, pulled her into his arms. At first she made a startled movement to break away, then her arms stole about his neck and her lips were against his.

"*Querida!*" she murmured. "What does that kiss mean to you, my own?"

"A pledge, honey. What does it mean to you?"

"A promise," she breathed.

THE END

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(Continued from page 107)

chance to tell you, kid," he said weakly. "First we got a debt to pay to the law. Maybe I'll have a chance to get out—if I last long enough—ahead of my time. An' you, son, you better clean your slate with the law, too. Me, I got to go back to Sundance. I been hunted enough."

Buck nodded solemnly, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "If you take it that way, Dad. I was goin' to suggest that we better take a trip to Sundance. Like you say, it's best to have things clean before we start out again. So soon as you're well enough, you an' me will go there together. Then we'll come back.

"You tough-gutted ol' pelican, one of the reasons I come down here was to *find* you! You didn't kill Ab Bostwick in the back room of that saloon in Lost Forks. I done plenty nosin' around, an' finally got a confession—signed, sealed an' witnessed, from a gent who claimed Ab had double-crossed him on a boundary line deal years before. He looked in the window, saw you two old souses about to pummel each other, an' shot Ab. You must of seen it, an' tried to plug him from the window, which would account for your gun bein' fired. You got a full pardon, waitin' for you back at Sundance."

All this, all working out in a way he hadn't even dared to hope, was a little too much for him, weak as he was. He just closed his eyes, and there was peace and contentment in him.

He couldn't say anything then because somehow his throat was choked and something in his eyes made the room blur. But it was as if he could look ahead, through the years that still stretched before him—good years of happiness and fulfillment, which were to be his and Buck's together. He smiled then, and the smile was still on his grizzled face as Buck and the others tip-toed outside.

THE END

(Continued from page 84)

The riders drew up, King and two others Jorie had seen at the meeting. They stared at the figures on the ground, the dead dogs, the two others on their feet and growling.

"Damme if I didn't get to thinkin'," King snapped at Jorie. "It would be a purty howdy-do to hear from Raleigh you're his white and shinin' knight, then have Clagget claim we were in on a raid. Tried to get here in time to stop him."

"He's stopped," Jorie said stiffly. "And if he lives he's hogtied till you can get the straight of it. If you want to square your tardiness, help us lug the live ones down to the house."

Jorie and Lillie rode home with King, all caught in a thoughtful silence. As they separated, the old man said, "Lillie, there ain't anything worse than a man with no brain and a hair-triggered tongue. Didn't mean what I said."

"Forget it, Bike."

But the oldster wasn't through. Eyeing Jorie in the moonlight, he said, "Know something, Games? It don't matter what I hear from Raleigh. I'm writing him another letter. It plumb amazed me what kind of people them Syrings are. He ain't the type to let his sheep cause trouble for us cow people. I'm telling Raleigh to let the man stay. And damn anybody hereabouts who tries to see it different." King swung around and stalked away from them.

"I'm writing Raleigh, myself," Jorie said.

"Then you're not going back?" Lillie asked softly.

"Not if I've got a job hereabouts."

"You've got more than a job, if you want it, Jorie." Their horses seemed to stop by instinct. And this time Lillie was eager to yield more than the touch of her cheek.

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(Continued from page 74)

Julia said, "Tom. Where are Thames and Barlow?"

"I buried them."

Julia said, "Oh," and the thought of what this meant was reflected back at him in the sudden darkening of her eyes. Jackson didn't want to explain, but something forced him.

"Thames shot first. Barlow had a knife. It was them or me."

"I see," Julia said. And for the first time her eyes went to the brown stain of blood on his side. She gasped. "You're hurt."

"Just a scratch. It's half healed already. I'd better see your dad, Julia. He'll be glad to have this silver, and then I've got to wash up."

"Wait a minute, Tom." Julia bit her lip, and a slow flush darkened the curve of her cheek. "Why did you do this? For me?"

"For you?" Very gently, Jackson shook his head. This was a thing he could not lie about. "I did it *after* you left me, Julia. After you'd said you wouldn't marry me. No, I did it for myself."

"Oh!" Julia's flush deepened. She stood hesitantly before him, and it came to Jackson that Julia was trying to tell him something very important, if she could find the words.

Julia said, "Tom, when you return the silver and wash up, come here. I'll give you supper. And Tom, you've fought your fight with pride, and you've won. That's what you meant when you said you did it for yourself, isn't it? Well, Tom, if you can do it, I can do it. I have something I want to do for *myself*. Will you let me give you supper?"

"In fifteen minutes, Julia."

Jackson wheeled away his horse and rode across the circle, searching for Calloway. Jackson was grinning.

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